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Bright lights, small city: New beginnings of the Singapore film industry

Samantha W.M. Tan
Edith Cowan University

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Bright Lights, Small City:
New Beginnings of the Singapore Film Industry

Samantha W.M. Tan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Award of
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1998

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

The Singapore government decided in 1985 that making movies and turning the country into a regional film centre was an ideal venture to help develop and sustain the country's economic growth. The nation has about 3.7 million people, and although English is studied as the first language, about half of the population (especially the older generation) are more well-versed in their mother tongue, ie. Chinese, Malay or Tamil. Because of this disparity, it would appear that the Singapore market doesn't have the critical mass to sustain a film industry unless the movies are made for export.

Little has been written on the Singapore film industry – information pertaining to filmmaking in the country in recent years has particularly been scarce (apart from some newspaper and magazine articles and press releases) – a hint, perhaps, of the slow growth of the industry. This thesis gives an insight into the significance history has played in producing the current filmmaking climate in Singapore. By examining the country's rather dismal film track record from its early beginnings in the early 20th century, to an in-depth analysis of two of the more popular full-length features made in the last two years, I seek to articulate the importance of identity and nationalism in the quest for a legitimate national cinema, and explore the reasons behind the economic and social need to construct a viable film industry in Singapore. Lastly, examining the current social and economic infrastructure of the country, and supported by interviews with veteran professionals from within the film industry, I hope to make an informed assessment on the possibility that Singapore might someday fulfil its dream of becoming "Hollywood of the East".

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date 18 / 12 / 18

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INTRODUCTION

Many creators and promoters of national identity selectively draw on the past for legitimacy and authority and seek to use it for current determinations. Handler (1988) makes the point that terms such as “lifeblood”, “conscience”, and “foundation” of a nation are used as metaphors to explore the importance of history in the construction of nations.

Singapore’s national identity is constituted on the basis of diverse races, various religions, and multiple sedimentations of history. After the country’s separation from the Federation of Malaysia due to political differences, much racial riots and social unrest occurred during 1965-67. The then fledgling government, People’s Action Party (PAP), had to forge a new national identity among the citizens by promoting economic survival only through concerted effort, and unifying the various local ethnic and racial groups – with their specific languages, religions, ideologies, and cultural practices – through government campaigns and media propaganda. As hardly anyone owned a television at that time, the most efficient form of visual propaganda came via the cinema (Lent, 1990, p.188-9).

The notion being constructed in Singapore works with dual discourses – “modern” and “democratic”, with “tradition” and “history” – for practical purposes to support the legitimacy of the government and increase their authority and promote their ideology. The political leaders regard communication media as powerful instruments to be properly utilised and guided to play a role in social and national development. They perceive the nation’s communication pattern as a largely one-way flow from the government to the citizens, with people at the media level serving a gatekeeping function (Birch, 1993a, p.78). Furthermore, being a small, predominantly Chinese

nation surrounded by bigger countries of other races, topics such as ethnicity and communist ideology are considered sensitive areas on which more restrictive measures will be imposed (Kuo & Chen, 1983, p.99).

A national cinema has the great potential to show different, alternate representations of its country (as opposed to government ideology and rosy national campaigns of a “happy, united community”), and thus the medium’s importance in constructing a more complete definition of “the nation” cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Although the Singapore film industry requires necessary creativity – as well as finances and facilities – to expand into a viable commodity, the challenge local filmmakers face, is to strike a balance in their portrayal of themes (so as to be acceptable within government nation-building objectives), while presenting at the same time realistic expositions of the lives and existences of marginal societies within the nation.

Chapter One

SINGAPORE FILM INDUSTRY : THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE

Filmmaking is an intertext of the past and the present, of form and content, of technology and the cultures of technology, of political and economic powers, of codes and cinematic representation – a complex where multiple layers of economic, cultural, and social practices come together. (Buck, 1992, p.116)

A historical background

Cinema was first introduced to Singapore in July 1901, when the first film of Queen Victoria's funeral was shown at the town hall to an exclusive audience. A year later, the general public had their view of this new form of entertainment when a series of short filmlets on European scenes and sports were shown in a makeshift tent on the Padang, a popular sports field located in the city centre. Although the visual quality was poor and there was no sound, the cinema was such a novelty that masses flocked to the shows (Chen, 1996, p.288).

In 1904 the first cinema – the Paris Cinema – was built, and sound effects were generated by special contraptions. Subsequently, other cinemas were set up, and silent films were imported from Japan, Great Britain and the United States. This new form of media proved to be extremely popular with the public: besides being vastly different from Chinese-style opera and puppet shows – previously being the sole forms of 'media' entertainment – they were able to experience the world around them for the first time; and especially, to ponder the cultural and physical ideologies presented by the western world (Turnbull, 1977, p.116).

Noting the demand for films in Singapore, cinema organisations soon began to establish themselves in the country. In the 1930s, Shaw Brothers (originally from Hong Kong) set up their film company in Singapore, and in the same decade, Cathay Productions was also founded. During the Japanese Occupation from 1942-1945, the companies were largely used as production and distribution platforms for propaganda films, extolling the virtues of the Japanese way of life and condemning the (western) foreigners. However, as anti-Japanese sentiments were high, the films only drew small audiences (Chen, 1996, p.301).

The film industry revived soon after the end of World War II. In 1951 there were thirty-nine cinemas showing a variety of British, American, Hong Kong and Chinese films. By 1960 the number had increased to sixty-two cinemas and an annual attendance of 22,567,000 persons (Yearbook of Statistics, 1967).

The film medium was also popular with the colonial government for public relations purposes. Documentary films about England and the Commonwealth were produced, but they lacked mass appeal and catered mainly to the English educated. When the People's Action Party – Singapore's first autonomous government after the country's initiation into nationhood status (and still the ruling party) – took over in 1965, they also produced a few public relations films which were shown in promotion of campaigns or exhibitions. The aim was to co-ordinate messages sent to the public, keeping them informed and persuaded to the government's point of view, as well as secure domestic security and national cohesiveness (Chen, 1996, p.305).

In 1947, Shaw Brothers set up Malay Film Production Limited. Cathay merged with another production house in 1953 to become Cathay-Keris. During a period spanning two decades,

twelve to sixteen Malay films were produced annually in these two studios. Although a menagerie of stars was created, the companies did not manage to reap good returns¹. Cheah (1997b, p.55) attributes the studios' lack of success to competition with the introduction of television; a more educated and choosy public; an Indonesian film industry which was developing at the same time; and the increasing popularity of Hollywood films in colour (as compared to black-and-white, lower-quality features made in Singapore). Furthermore, there were no concessions or financial incentives from the government to aid in the growth of local filmmaking.

As a result, Malay Film Production closed in 1967 and Cathay-Keris followed three years later. The demise of these two companies saw a major reduction in film production ("Reel life", 1995). In the 70s, the movie making industry was virtually dormant except for the efforts of an independent producer, Sunny Lim, who made a few low budget spy-action movies. In 1977, eight films were produced by four local film companies, but the industry failed to make a real comeback. Cheah (1997b) notes that it didn't seem realistic to compete with the popular, flourishing film industries of Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The revival of the industry

In 1985, interest in local filmmaking was rekindled during the recession. The Economic Development Board (EDB) realised that becoming a film hub would bring about more skilled labour, jobs, training opportunities, new technologies and increase tourism, thus diversifying the economy and possibly maintaining long-term economic growth. It would also go hand-in-hand with the country's promotion of Singapore as a regional centre for the arts (Tan and Soh,

¹ For example, from 1953 - 58, Cathay-Keris made twenty-five movies and only three brought in profits, resulting in losses of S\$1.5m (a hefty amount in those times, especially for a small filmmaking industry). In the 60s,

1994, p.129-30). In 1987, teams were sent by the EDB to regional film-making centres such as Hong Kong and Taiwan to study censorship regulations and tax concessions there. Four years later, the Ministry of Information and the Arts, headed by Brigadier-General George Yeo, also set up a Creative Services Development Plan to advance the country's entertainment and arts industry including film-making. Its main objectives are: to promote the Singapore International Film Festival to foreign filmmakers and distributors; offer attractive incentives to woo filmmakers and film companies from overseas to set up production facilities in Singapore; work with local tertiary institutions in establishing film courses; and offer scholarships and tax incentives to encourage budding local filmmakers ("Plan", 1991).

For a short period, it appeared the industry was slowly, but surely, being resurrected. In 1990, Movie Impact was set up in Singapore by a famous Hong Kong actor/director, Eric Tsang, who filmed a movie in Singapore called *The Last Blood* (PG). Although the first movie to be made by a Singapore-based company and marketed regionally, it resembled more of a typical Hong Kong action thriller than a national production² (Koh, 1991). In 1991, a small milestone was achieved when the Restricted (R) film classification rating was introduced, allowing more films to pass uncensored.

In the same year, *Medium Rare* (R) became the first full-length local movie to be made after a dearth of more than two decades³. It was a story based on the real-life story of Adrian Lim, a cult leader who in a bid to achieve immortality, raped and mutilated two children, and was later

although it cost S\$120,000 to make a movie, ticket sales usually didn't cover half that amount.

² The lead crew and cast were all Hong Kongers, and the dialogue was in Cantonese – Hong Kong's official language – which later had to be dubbed into Mandarin for the Singapore and Taiwan audience.

³ See Appendix II for data on all Singapore films made since 1991.

hanged ("Reel Life", 1995). As producer Errol Pang intended to market the movie overseas, the plot was diverged considerably from Lim's story to make it attractive to an international audience. Furthermore, the essential crew members and lead actors were foreigners⁴. As the real cult murders were deeply etched into the nation's subconscious, local audiences did not like the movie – they felt it had lost any essence of being a true Singapore story – and they also complained of the grainy, poor-quality film stock. The film subsequently performed badly at the box-office (Ghosh, 1992).

After *Medium Rare*'s significant failure at the box-office, no one dared to risk making another film (Tan, interview, 1998). The industry was virtually dormant until three years later, when *Bugis Street* (1994) hit the screens; *Mee Pok Man* followed in 1995. A year later, *Army Daze*, a comedy about a mismatched group of army boys, was released in the cinemas and became the highest grossing local movie to-date. Then in 1997, budding amateur Singaporean filmmakers brought *God Or Dog*, *12 Storeys*, and *The Road Less Traveled* to the local screens as well as the 10th Singapore International Film Festival. In 1998, two new local movies have recently been released in the cinemas: *Forever Fever* and *Money No Enough* have already transcended *Army Daze*'s box-office achievement and their success might possibly pave the way for future national filmmaking.

Film Censorship

Background

Film censorship was introduced in 1923, during colonial rule when the British government was cautious about the possible adverse impact of the mass media – especially the spread of

⁴ US actor Dore Kraus was the lunatic killer and British actress Jamie Marshall portrayed a foreign correspondent.

communist propaganda which might weaken the hegemony of the whites. It was also essential to ban movies that promoted the mingling of whites and other races, or flaunted 'immoral' values such as (scanty) dressing and criminal activities⁵ (Lent, 1990, p.186). A Board of Film Censors (BFC) was later set up by the British in 1953, but film censorship later came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs when Singapore achieved partial self-government in 1959. In 1963, BFC was moved under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture. Today, it is part of the Ministry of Information and The Arts (MITA).

In 1991 the film and cinema industry were given a major boost following the implementation of the classification system: General (G); Parent-Guidance (PG); No Children under 16 (NC-16); and Restricted to 18 and above (R), which meant more films could be shown under the separate classifications. However, the R-rating was changed to RA (Restricted-Artistic)⁶ a year later, after filmgoers (especially parents) complained that film distributors were saturating the cinemas with low-grade, soft-porn movies⁷ (Fernando, 1991). Cinemas located in residential areas were not allowed to screen RA movies – only theatres in the city were permitted. The age limit of 18 was brought up to 21 for the viewing of these films⁸.

⁵ The official censor's office screened all films entering the Straits Settlement consisting of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. In 1925, it prohibited 12% of all films from entering Singapore, and censored objectionable portions from 90% of others (Lent, 1990, p.187).

⁶ More on censorship and the inconsistency of this new classification rating will be mentioned in Chapter Two.

⁷ A survey commissioned by the Censorship Review Committee in 1992 revealed a surprising finding – that by large, Singaporeans were still rather conservative in their outlook and values in relation to censorship. 38% of people asked for tougher censorship of sex and violent scenes, as compared to 22% who requested a relaxation in the laws. The study also showed that a majority of the respondents found pre-marital sex, cohabitation, extra-marital sex and homosexuality objectionable (Davie, 1992). It should be borne in mind that the survey was conducted by the government – and there was no mention of the demographics of the respondents, such as age, sex or occupation.

⁸ It might be worth mentioning that young male adults are drafted into the army for compulsory national service. The RA-rating was greeted with much criticism as many Singaporeans thought it ludicrous that an 18-year-old would be considered old enough to die for his country, but not mature enough to watch an RA-rated movie with explicit scenes (Soh, 1992). This complaint and the 1992 survey above would suggest that there was much contradiction regarding the extent of censorship favoured by the viewers.

The Process

BFC has the right to censor all films, videotapes and discs meant for public exhibition or circulation, as well as related publicity materials such as posters and advertisements. It is also empowered to vet scripts for all films produced in Singapore, and oversees the importation and release of all films and other viewing paraphernalia (Singapore 1995, 1995, p.249). The Board previews all films with these broad guidelines in mind: sex and nudity; violence; drugs; criminal activity or gangsterism, language, religious and racial; and political. It looks at the film's thematic content and the message it conveys according to the country's social norms and values and the government's objectives of nation building and national cohesiveness; determining if certain explicit scenes are integral to the plot or are simply presented for titillation⁹ (ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1993).

Although BFC exercises the power of censorship, the Films Appeals Committee (FAC) can override its decision to ban or censor a film. FAC's nine members are appointed by MITA for one year and represent a cross-section of Singapore's community, from grassroot leaders to educationists, lawyers and religious leaders. However, before a film is submitted to the FAC, it will first be reviewed by a consultative 56-member Films Advisory Panel (FAP) which consists of (among other professions) housewives and teachers, to help BFC decide if a film should be passed without cuts (Tan and Soh, 1994, p.152).

According to government press releases, FAC and FAP "reflect not only conservative and liberal elements but also the young and old" (Tan and Soh, 1994, p.151). I would argue that this statement seems rather erroneous -- no organisation can truly hope to represent the views of

⁹ A certain amount of nudity and foreplay is allowed but not the (simulated) act of actual intercourse, as that would count as pornography. See Appendix III for more information on BFC's censorship criteria.

the various cross-sections and marginal groups which exist in a nation, especially committees which consist mostly of the mainstream elite. Film censorship can obviously be seen to be a tedious process in the country, a regimented effort by the government to keep out unwanted influences of immorality or divisive issues incompatible with Singapore's nation building aims: to achieve this aim without being seen as being unnecessarily authoritarian, it ropes in the support of parents and the more conservative (and 'moral') professionals.

Before starting research on this topic, I was of the impression that Singapore's stringent censorship laws would pose a fundamental problem in creating a viable national film industry. The success of *Army Daze* (1996), *12 Storeys* (1997), *Forever Fever* (1998) and *Money No Enough* (1998) – all PG-rated – would suggest that is not a substantial barrier to the production of a quality national cinema. Furthermore, the government, to its credit, has not been arbitrary with censorship – one substantial proof of its intent to relax film censorship (and boost local industry) was *God or Dog* (1997), an RA-rated remake of the story of cult leader Adrian Lim and his 'sex and gore' rituals (Khoo, interview, 1998).

The Singapore International Film Festival

The Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) celebrated its 10th anniversary in 1997. When it started more than a decade ago, the purpose was to provide a platform for Singapore cinema - virtually non-existent since the 1970s. Cheah (1997, p.50) writes: "There was only the belief that if you build it, they will come – the filmmakers, that is." The reputation of the Festival has slowly grown throughout the years, and the number of local filmmakers submitting short films to the event has also increased. *Bugis Street* (1994) and *Mee Pok Man* (1995) were the first two full-length features to be screened at SIFF respectively. In 1997 *God Or Dog*, *The Road Less*

Travelled and *12 Storeys* were also submitted to the festival. Of the three, only *12 Storeys* – a dark pessimistic look at Singaporeans living in crowded government-subsidised Housing Development Board (HDB) flats – was critically acclaimed by both audience and international programmers attending the event. Regardless, the movies marked, for the first time in twenty years, Singaporean films which had tackled local themes, and rekindled hope that the film industry is making a comeback (Hiebert, 1997, p.68).

The National Discourse

Carefully packaged aspects of the material legacy of history form a central ingredient of tourism and consumer society. It can serve a pragmatic goal in the form of producing national films for marketing to both international and domestic markets for generating economic revenue; indeed, that is often the critical reason behind a government's decision to set up a film industry. However, films are not just a commercial business, they can also be understood as works of art; form of mass entertainment; and they produce meanings. They are also cultural practices, in which artistic, entertainment, industrial, technological, economic and political dimensions are inextricably related (Dissanayake, 1992, p.1). To discuss the production of culture in Singapore cinema, we invariably need to first analyse national identity.

Nationalism arose from the trappings of modern capitalism and the emergence of the print medium. Anderson (1983) points out that a nation is a social structure as well as artefacts of imagination and collective sacrifice. National identities are fictional, utilised to bring on the question of difference – how the uniqueness of one nation differs from the uniqueness of other comparable nations. The boundaries of a nation are inscribed less by physical topography than by history, culture, politics, ideology, ethnicity, religion, material forces, economic

organisation and social meaning: the notion of difference is thus central to the construction of a national identity.

Vanaik (1992, p.45) suggests that national identities can be fostered through sovereign, horizontal (social organisations) and bounded (identity) categories. They can be understood in relation to continuity, unity in plurality, the authority of the past, and accommodation to the present; with similar language, religion, shared values, culture and history to define that identity and membership, spilling across temporal and spatial boundaries. He asserts that there is no one common or conclusive feature which marks nationalism in different nations – it might be any or all of the factors above. Singapore is comprised of groups which, despite ethnic and racial diversity, are still imagined as a national community. Its members can never get to meet or know most of their fellow members; yet an image of this national community is created in the public sphere. Irrespective of the very real inequities and social exploitations that exist in the nation, the government promotes it as a deep comradeship, and it is the identification of this comradeship that persuades people to risk their lives for their imagined community.

It should be noted that all contemporary writing on the nation insists that any attempt to create a fictional unity bears little relation to the experiences of individual citizens. Even within a nation itself, its members live varied, different existences, affected by those very same factors that delineate separate nations. Although the propagators of a given national identity would like to present nationalism as a unified discourse, it in fact consists of a plurality of discourses. Dissanayake (1992, p.14) asserts that national identity is not a natural phenomenon – instead, it is an artificial, ideological construct and a site of hegemonic struggle. This is where the

usefulness of a national cinema as a public talking-piece becomes crucial, and I will be examining in later chapters, the various representations of national identity in film.

Chapter Two

CONTEXTUALISING THE SINGAPORE FILM INDUSTRY

It is necessary to problematize the notion of 'national cinema' as a monolithic cultural apparatus acting on behalf of a unified, homogeneous population within a national boundary One should be careful not to surrender the opportunities for the film construction of cultural differences provided by a national cinema. (Moran, 1996, p.11)

The concept of national cinema has been of rising significance in film debates in recent years; among these, there are two sets of arguments characteristically mobilised in defence of a national cinema. The first of these is economic and lays stress upon the value of a national film industry to the national economy in terms of the creation of jobs, attraction of overseas investment, export earnings and general beneficial effects to the service and tourist industries (McIntyre, 1994).

At the opening ceremony of the fourth Singapore International film festival in 1991, Brigadier-General George Yeo (Minister for Information and the Arts) asserted that the arts in Singapore were dependent upon the economic success of Singapore: "For arts to flourish, there must be a critical mass of creative activities and a long term economic basis for their sustenance." ("Call", 1991). Although the case for support of Singapore cinema on 'artistic' and 'cultural' terms are acknowledged by the government and constructed to be an integral

part of the Singapore lifestyle, the approach taken by the Economic Development Board in promoting the set up of a film industry appears chiefly to concern dollars and sense – including the benefits Singapore films can perhaps achieve for the country's regional standing, by 'advertising' the national culture and way of life to a wide audience overseas.

The creation of a Singapore film industry would thus be similar to strategies applied to any of the country's other economic activities; the means to an end – a way to attract foreign investment and boost tourism, with the 'culturally-enriching' aspect taking second place to economics. In this respect, culture is seen as a reward for material success and is all part of the push to make Singapore the hub of the region. Going to the movies then, especially to a locally-made movie, is constructed as one of the responsibilities of the loyal citizen in this nation-building process.

With this first scenario, it should be noted that economic arguments regarding the value of a national film industry do not necessarily guarantee a national cinema characterised by national preoccupations (McIntyre, 1994). It is possible to conceive of a Singapore film industry, making films within the country and employing Singapore citizens, but not making recognisable Singaporean films. One good example is *God Or Dog* (1997), a remake of local cult leader Adrian Lim's ritual murders. The movie was given a stylistic treatment similar to Hong Kong films so that it was almost indistinguishable from the latter product (the fact that the director had worked in Hong Kong for many years would perhaps explain this).

Film and Nationalism

The second case for a national cinema is largely dependent upon cultural arguments. Andersen (1991, p.6) notes that nationalism can be defined as the modern counterpart to kinship, with its own symbolically distinctive forms. Although Singapore is comprised of different racial groups which reflect various religions and values, the common aim of working towards national development, their common social values, and their similar historical roots or colonisation heritage holds them together as a community. In the same vein, the case for a national cinema can be argued as promoting a sense of 'nation' and enhancing its cultural fabric, hence the importance of supporting indigenous filmmaking.

Anderson (1991) describes the importance of print capitalism in generating the idea of nationhood, and observes that newspapers and novels were the most important forms in the formation of national consciousness. In the modern world, cinema also becomes a significant mode of communication and its role in conjuring up the 'imagined community' is enormous. Harvey (1989) points out that it works to capture the complex and dynamic relationship between temporality and spatiality in a way that is not possible for other media: for example, there is a frequent tension between nationhood and cultural identity (such as racial and religious differences) in almost all Asian countries, and cinema enables one to understand the contours of this phenomenon more clearly. How a ruling government tells its unifying and legitimising story to its citizens is exceedingly important in the establishment of nationhood – and the big screen has and can occupy a central place in the endeavour.

Definitions of a National Cinema

Hill (1992) observes of a national film industry that:

It is quite possible to conceive of a national cinema, in the sense of one which works with or addresses nationally specific materials, which is none the less critical of inherited notions of national identity, which does not assume the existence of a unique or unchanging 'national culture', and which is quite capable of dealing with social divisions and differences (p.17).

He also suggests that a country's film history can be considered from certain stylistic or thematic parameters, related to the country's culture and the general background of its film production methods (Hill, 1994, p.5).

Conversely, Soila, Widding and Iversen (1998) argue that nationality in film implies a relation to the topical and the specific of the culture, rather than from any singularly demonstrable difference in stylistic measures between different countries' productions. They assert that a country's national film is determined by the separate life values in relation to other countries – in other words, to speak of a Singapore national cinema is a construction which becomes specific (to that country) only in relation to other countries.

From the various arguments, one can see that the question of national cinema is complex and contentious. On the one hand a national industry would have relatively clearly defined economic boundaries and methods of classification, producing films which may not necessarily involve national themes or preoccupations, and which often includes financial and labour participation from other countries. On the other hand, there is the cultural

conception of what constitutes a national film. We have inherited a dominant conception of what it is to be a nation, a collective consciousness about nationhood which has, in part, been constructed by cultural referents, including cinema; however, Higson (1995) points out that the achievement of this is often at the expense of representing the diversity of any nation: "This imaginative process must be able to resolve the actual history of conflict and negotiation in the experience of community. It must be able to hold in place – or specifically to exclude – any number of other experiences of belonging" (p.6).

As I mentioned earlier, the concept of a nation is 'imagined' and therefore the image of national unity is a 'false' one – cinema can be used to contribute to this fiction, but it can also be used to show the differences within the nation. Quite often, national film cultures have functioned as a counterbalance to the hegemony of the ideologies of the international commercial film industries and (more significantly) local governments, constituting an antithesis or alternative. The false homogeneity of a nation will crumble when filmmakers seek to give expression to the hopes and experiences of the minorities; whether they are ethnic, linguistic, religious, or class. Films dealing with the worlds of minorities serve to open up a representational space from where the hegemonic discourse of the state can be purposely challenged and the idea of cultural difference brought to fore.

Film as Culture

Dissanyake (1992, p.4) suggests that cinema production can be considered as the fusion of tangible resources that go into making films, the human effort required to transform these resources into works of art and entertainment, as well as the manifold relationships that are

involved in the process. As one produces a film, one is also producing a whole web of social relations around that commodity.

He also argues that cinema interprets culture, and that the content of a film attempts to show the values, beliefs and social state of the culture in which it was made (Dissanayake, 1992, p.7). In commercial cinema, cultural and commodity production are integrated, generating in the audience the wants, fears, and anxieties by which they are situated in a modern, capitalist society. Members of society recognise (or more appropriately, *misrecognise*) themselves in the way in which ideology places them, and willingly adhere to the subjectivities conferred on them and to their participation in the activities of society.

Similarly, Staiger (1989, p.399) cautions that film is not merely a reflection of a pre-given, present experience. It is frequently the hybrid of old cultural meanings; even the creation and generator of new ones. Moreover, the filmmaker is not the sole agent of the production of ideological practice. He or she is implicated in material and social conditions and imperatives beyond his or her conscious control: technologies of production, the market, audiences, political relations, and so forth. Similarly, a viewer's ideological consumption of films will depend on a variety of factors – place of birth; gender; sexuality; race; class; education and occupation. The making of films (by different filmmakers) and the subsequent seeing of it (by different audiences) are thus interventions in the production of social meaning (Dermody & Jacka, 1997).

Film Policy: Censorship and its Effects

The government has undertaken various strategies¹ to promote and construct its model of the local film industry, and cracks are gradually appearing in the schemes. These begin with the tensions that are inherent in a rather ironic situation where the Singapore population, generally held to be the world's most avid movie-goers, are watching films produced in cultures which, in so many ways, appear to represent potential threats to a social fabric which has been carefully constructed by a authoritarian government anxious to develop a people driven by a culture of self-sacrificing nation building, and unwilling to let in 'undesirable' elements which threaten the social framework of the country (Birch, 1993a).

Censorship has always been a major feature of the media in Singapore. Before the film classification system came about, anyone was allowed to watch movies screened in all local cinemas. Material which were considered an incitement to violence, a breach of the peace, the promotion of hostility between races, prejudicial to the national interest, public disorder or national security would be censored: films would be screened with large gaps in them, or some would never be shown at all (Birch, 1993). Prior to 1991, four out of every five overseas movie companies that Singapore companies approached for films to screen at festivals, would turn down the request – they were worried that their creations would be indiscriminately censored. The irony was, most of the films would probably not have encountered problems even under the old system, but the uncertainty was enough to deter them (Tan, interview, 1998).

¹ This is will be described in detail in Chapter Three.

Some films that got censored

In 1979, American director Peter Bogdanovich shot a film in Singapore. *Saint Jack* was the story of a good-hearted pimp - had shots of transvestites in the notorious Bugis Street and Chinese gangsters complete with vulgar dialects. Although the movie also showcased some of Singapore's memorable developments – wide pans of older buildings set against rising skyscrapers – the authorities banned it when they realised that Bogdanovich had altered the previously approved script (Cheah, 1997, p.56). The film only got screened locally for the first time, at the 1997 Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF). In 1994, a Singapore short film won Eric Khoo the Best Director and Best Achievement awards at the SIFF. *Pain* was the story of a young man who degenerates from masochism to murder, but because of its excessive violence, the movie was banned in Singapore. In the same year, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was banned because of its controversial religious content. The rape scene in *The Accused* was cut because of the simulation of intercourse – Hiebert (1997, p.68) writes that the act invited much censure from the viewers, as the thematic substance of the film was lost through that one cut.

Review of Censorship

In July 1991, after a major review of censorship, the new film classification system (G, PG, NC-16, and R – which became RA a few months later) was introduced as a move to 'open up' Singapore as an information hub with a strong regional and global presence; but also to appease an expanding population of well-traveled, educated and increasingly vocal middle class ("Censorship", 1991).

An important point should be made here regarding information as a form of control: The government realises that information is power – whoever controls its flow within the nation-state, controls the nation-state. As Singaporeans become more cosmopolitan (and with the advance in electronic technology), they have ways to secure information previously prohibited by the government. Instead of losing its hold on the flux of information going in and out of the country, the government's main aim in liberalising censorship appears to be a new means in which to maintain control of the state.

To further this argument, Tan and Soh (1994, p.158) write that under the Restricted-Artistic (RA) rating, movies have to have “reasonably well-crafted plots” to be screened, yet it is interesting to note that BFC has no fixed standard measurement as to a film's thematic or artistic merit². The fact that the rape scene in *The Accused* – the core theme of the whole movie – was censored (even under the RA-rating) shows the irony of the RA classification system as a gauge for quality (but explicit) films: their artistic or aesthetic value do not seem to be the prime criterion here. The process is fundamentally aimed at maintaining the social values and integrity of the citizens, and secure long-term racial stability and public morality among the citizens of varied multicultural and multiracial backgrounds – vital elements in the government's nation-building mission. BFC simply acts as a government watchdog, censoring films it deems are morally destructive or a threat to national security.

Despite this, Tan (interview, 1998) asserts that the new rating system was an important factor contributing to the immediate increase in both production activity and general exhibition activity

² See Appendix III for BFC's broad censorship guidelines.

in the repertoire of films screened in Singapore. Almost every foreign company consented to having their films shown in the country, and foreign films which were banned before 1991 could be allowed screening under the RA-rating. Local filmmakers could tackle more nitty-gritty topics, and although certain issues are still considered sensitive if not taboo (such as pornography, religious desecration, racism or homosexuality), there was overall more confidence in the local film industry.

If the film industry does survive and flourish, there is the question of what kind of national cinema it can be: If the government wants to promote an 'attractive' Singapore lifestyle to the overseas market, censorship might still be a hurdle in producing different representations of Singapore life, as some themes are still disallowed expression. Minister of Information and the Arts, Brigadier-General George Yeo cautions:

We must do nothing to weaken the structure of the family However we relax, we must maintain certain minimum standards against pornography, excessive violence, and themes which inflame racial, religious hatred in Singapore. ("Censorship", 1991)

It should be noted though, that *12 Storeys* (1997) – a bleak and unkind portrayal of life in government-subsidised Housing Development Board (HDB) flats³ – was screened both locally and at film festivals around the world without government interference. This would suggest that the government is at least tolerant of moderate criticism of the nation.

³ This film will be examined in detail in Chapter Four.

Competition

Soila, Widding & Iversen (1998) suggest that a film can be considered national in a specific sense if it has not, or to only a limited extent, been exportable to other countries. This means that it is national in a basic sort of way: a culture that stays within itself, something which exists only for that country. I would argue that this 'strategy' is a luxury not beneficial to the fledgling Singapore film industry. If it is to survive against the myriad popular movies from Hollywood and its Asia counterparts, it needs to be able to market its films to a transnational audience, as the domestic market is simply too small to sustain the costly endeavour of filmmaking.

As most Singapore films made are predominantly in (a linguistic mix of) English, Mandarin and Chinese dialects, Singapore is looking towards Asia with its huge Chinese market, which for long decades has been under the domain of the Hong Kong (and to lesser extents, Taiwan and China) film industry (Seow and Koh, 1989). Currently, local companies would rather invest in Hong Kong or US films, as the chances of making a profit is so much higher. Financing local films is still considered a high-risk, potentially low-return (or no-return) activity – the main reason being the short track record of local films. Talents and film facilities in established film industries of other countries are highly advanced, and serious filmmakers and movie companies are not likely to want to give up the comfort of their pre-existing infrastructure to work in Singapore.

To woo them, the government provides special incentives, such as waivers of script censorship, awarding of pioneer status, income tax waivers, and minimal red-tape to facilitate filming

schedules⁴ ("Tax", 1993). The reunification of Hong Kong and China (and the possible reunification of Taiwan) has also seen some film companies shift their base to Singapore, and the government is optimistic that the country will be able to do well in the Chinese film business. Moreover, Singapore's predominantly Chinese environment appeals to Hong Kong and Taiwan film companies, while its modern infrastructure and communications network would ease the transition (Seow and Koh, 1989). Finally, compared to countries such as Taiwan or Hong Kong, Singapore is relatively safe from triad activities and extortion. Stricter copyright and anti-pirating laws are also enforced in Singapore more than other regional countries (Koh, 1991).

Low Budget Competition

In a small country like Singapore, there seems to be no other alternative than to attempt the low budget film-making route in order to reduce risk (particularly to private capital), increase numbers of production and generate at least the possibility of (modest) profitability across a slate of production. Compared with the medium-budget film (such as which Hong Kong can afford) a much smaller proportion of budget would need to be raised from financial institutions or private sources for a local film.

McIntyre (1994, p.106) suggests three elements to stimulating a low-budget mentality and capacity. The imperative must be, whenever possible, to minimise financial risk (especially when it is sponsored capital) and maximise the possibility of profit: (1) Courses, training, seminars or information should be provided about low-budget filmmaking, but balanced with a good cultural slant for quality national films; (2) There needs to be a refined definition of profit

⁴ The incentives are given on a case-by-case basis.

and risk. While private investors, bankers and financial institutions will want guaranteed monetary return on film investment, they must also take into account the value to their country of supporting film productions and creating jobs; (3) It is important to note that low-budget filmmaking is not just a financial imperative – it also has aesthetic potential. A film like *12 Storeys* (1997), for example, was successful despite its cash constraints – and profitable *precisely because* of its low budget.

The one defining character of low-budget filmmaking is that it dissolves the distinction between commercial and cultural filmmaking. At the end of the day, the creation of a full-scale Hong Kong-style commercial movie industry in Singapore is just not viable nor foreseeable in the short-to-medium term (Lim, interview, 1998). A small scale, low-budget industry – using inventive mixes of public and private finance – might subsequently turn out to be successful (and sustainable). I would suggest another significant advantage of applying the low-budget route: Developing skills and track records will attract government funding to build better production facilities – with this will come the possibility of increasing the number of medium-budget films that occasionally get made, and opportunities for increased co-productions and sponsorship.

Singapore's National Cinema – Art or Economics?

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Hill (1994) argues that it is quite possible to conceive of a cinema which is nationally specific, without being either nationalist or attached to homogenising myths of national identity: it would be sensitive to social differences (ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation) within an identifiable national context, giving

legitimate representations of the various marginal groups, and does not assume the existence of a unique or unchanging 'national culture'.

Elsaesser (1989, p.322) notes that although the employment of 'nationally specific' (but none the less 'internationally recognisable') referents in films is frequently of critical importance to the marketing and international success of a national film, he cautions that at times, the marketing of national specificity for international consumption is likely to encourage the use of the most conventional (stereotypical) or readily recognisable (general) markers of nationality and national identity – hence, the images which are most readily exportable would precisely be those which a more enquiring, encompassing national cinema would seek to challenge. The implication is that often, the most interesting type of national cinema that its citizens can identify with may not be the type which markets profitably overseas (Moran, 1996, p.13).

Taking these observations in account, I would suggest that presently, Singapore needs a delicate balance in its construction of a national cinema – it should approach more popular themes of a 'universal' nature (which can travel), so as to secure profits and generate revenue. With a good track record and a more established industry, local filmmakers will have further opportunity to question and explore deeper the various and little known facets of the country.

Chapter Three

CREATING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

The creation of the modern Singapore film industry is a major undertaking which stands at the end of a line of similar 'cultural industry' initiatives that the government has promoted since the mid 1980s, not only in a bid to make Singapore a centre for arts in the region, but also because they are economic growth areas which can help generate investment, jobs and urban regeneration. However, progress in regards to the revival of local filmmaking has been slow. Daisy Goh, Director of the Singapore Economic Development Board's (EDB) Creative Business Programme says:

The general perception is that Singapore is not a naturally film-producing country. Our small population base means a limited supply of creative cohort. Film financing is new, and we have to build up comprehensive high-quality technical supporting services, such as post-film productions. (Ghosh, 1992)

The focus of this chapter is on the infrastructure of filmmaking rather than any cultural or artistic concerns (although they do need to be brought together in any fully adequate consideration of the kind of industry that might be possible in Singapore). I will look at the steps that have been taken to promote and encourage industry development, in particular, examining the main areas of film production and distribution activity currently prevalent in Singapore: voluntary, co-productions, commercial, subsidised and independent filmmaking, exhibiting and distributing facilities. Finally, I will analyse problems the country still faces in its attempt to generate a national film business, and debate the the industry's potential to be a long-term source of revenue for the country.

Voluntary

The Singapore Film Society (SFS) was established in 1947 by a group of film enthusiasts. An independent, non-profit organisation, SFS works closely with the National Arts Council, the Economic Development Board, embassies and cinema operators to promote the appreciation of cinema and film as a form of entertainment. With the increasing activity of film production in recent years, it has become an influential organisation and important link between government agencies and filmmakers. Besides providing a screening platform and (occasionally) resolving logistics and red tape issues (such as censorship) for the filmmaker, it regularly campaigns with the government in the construction of new infrastructure.

SFS has screened many short films (and a few feature films) made by local filmmakers, and continues to bring in good films from all over the world to showcase at international film festivals held in Singapore¹. These events also have the important function of acting as a medium of interaction between professionals from the local and international film industries, as renowned overseas filmmakers, film programmers and well-known critics from the international film arena are invited.

Ironically, the one film festival SFS does not organise is the annual Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF). As a non-profit organisation, SFS has restrictions on receiving sponsorship from companies, while SIFF relies on precisely that source of finance to make it the nation's largest annual film affair. As the government considers SIFF the most important event in promoting Singapore's fledgling industry to the international arena, Film Festival (a private-limited business enterprise) was specially incorporated in 1986 to source funding from investors for this sole purpose.

¹ Some of the events include the British, Italian and Norwegian Film Festivals.

Government Aid in the Film Business

International film festivals

For a film industry to be commercially successful, it is imperative for filmmakers to be able to showcase their creations at platforms and fora outside the domestic market. According to Kenneth Tan² (interview, 1998), although local cinemas and festivals are a good stepping stone for a filmmaker's portfolio, it is vital that the films are acquired for overseas distribution, and this is usually achieved at international festivals and fairs, where films can be seen by movie distributors from around the world.

Director Eric Khoo is a prime example of the importance of the Singapore International Film Festival in enabling local films to be distributed overseas. He submitted his first short film, *Barbie Digs Joe* – a story about plastic love, using stop-motion photography with GI Joe and Barbie doll – to a video competition in 1989. It won almost all the awards, and was later screened at the 1989 SIFF (albeit not in competition), where a programmer from the Hawaii Film Festival bought it for screening.

That same year, SIFF created a Short Film Competition (SFC) section, and Khoo submitted his first competition short film in 1990. *August* won the Best Film award and subsequently screened in Japan and Europe. Throughout the years, Khoo continued to submit films to the SFC segment: besides establishing himself as a competent filmmaker, he managed to sell a few of his other films to international film festivals. His 1994 short film, *Pain*, featured in a number of international film festivals, including screenings in Rotterdam, Toronto, Vancouver, Calcutta, San Francisco, Brussels and Hong Kong. The movie also won him the Best Director award and a Special Achievement award at the 1994 SIFF (Khoo, Feb 1998).

² Chairman of the Singapore Film Society as well as the national Arts Resource Panel (ARP) for film.

The latter award was a sponsorship from Singapore film production facilities allowing him to make a short film. However, he convinced them to increase the sponsorship money for the creation of a full length feature, and *Mee Pok Man* finally premiered in SIFF in 1995. The film was subsequently invited to screen at more than forty film festivals, including prestigious events such as Moscow, Berlin and Cannes (Khoo, interview, 1998).

Other Singapore films have also benefited from participation at film fairs: *Bugis Street* (1994) was sold for distribution in the US after a film programmer saw its screening at that year's SIFF; *12 Storeys* (1997) – another Eric Khoo movie – won the Critics Prize and the Young Cinema Award at the SIFF, and was also screened at the Cannes Film Festival where it was picked up for commercial release in France.

Film as an official arts institution

1997 was a particularly significant year for the film industry, as the government stepped up its efforts to promote local production. Historically, the National Arts Council (NAC) had only officially recognised and promoted dance, fine arts and drama as art forms: the annual Singapore Festival of Arts event only had a relatively small Film Section managed by the Singapore Film Society (Tan, interview, 1998). However, 14 March 1997, NAC formalised the inclusion of film as an art, which led to the creation of an Arts Resource Panel³ (ARP) for film. Besides one NAC member representation (so as to keep the link with the government), included on the Panel were the Chairman Kenneth Tan (also SFS Chairman), Eric Khoo (film director who made *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*), and Phillip Cheah (well-known local author and screenwriter).

³ A promotion board established for every officially recognised art form, made up essentially of artists and practitioners from that particular field, and which provides policy direction in relation to that area.

Creating the foundation

In filmmaking, finding money needed to make movies poses a big hurdle. One avenue that filmmakers have is to turn to SFS or the SIFF for a list of potential sponsors, and then try to convince the latter to finance their films – a rather tedious approach which expends precious time and yields uncertain results, the reason simply being that most companies are out to make profits, and local films usually do not achieve big numbers at the box-office (Hiebert, 1997, p.68). By the same token, banks and finance companies are not inclined to risk lending a huge sum to local filmmakers.

NAC was requested by the ARP to provide a sum of money which could directly be utilised for filmmaking. Concluding that the plan was not feasible as there could only be limited sponsorship; NAC instead agreed to finance film training by awarding bursaries and scholarships to further film studies overseas.

With the possible exception of Ngee Ann Polytechnic (which offers a specialised three-year Film, Sound and Video Diploma Course), film curricula in other local institutions do not focus on the production side of film: National University of Singapore has a Bachelor of Arts course in which Film Studies is just one of many arts-major areas; while National Technological University's Bachelor Degree in Mass Communication contains only Film History and Film Aesthetics among its other (non-film) units. More significantly, there is no film academic curricula at postgraduate level at any of the tertiary institutions.

The present pool of skilled film personnel is inadequate to sustain a viable film industry – most filmmakers have to produce television programmes and commercials to augment income. The pioneer batch of forty Ngee Ann Polytechnic film students that graduated in 1995 were offered jobs with production houses and filmmakers before they had even

graduated. Demand is huge – one student was offered S\$7000 a month – an astonishing sum considering that a fresh Diploma graduate's salary is usually between S\$1400-S\$1800 (Goh, interview, 1997).

Singapore's Economic Development Board, observing the need for people trained in production, offered Ngee Ann Polytechnic S\$7 million to build state-of-the-art digital editing and post-production facilities, so as to be able to increase their intake of film students ("Ngee Ann", 1993). The institution currently has more than a hundred students training with some of the most advanced film equipment in the country (Goh, interview, 1998).

Similarly, NAC realised that expanding the talent pool would be a practical long-term solution to developing the industry and offered, in 1997, its first two Masters of Film scholarships: Sandi Tan (a former well-known entertainment reporter from the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times*) went to University of Columbia, New York; and Geraldine Kok was sent to Yale University, London. Furthermore, NAC invited students who were interested in studying film-making in Singapore to apply for a bursary, setting aside S\$38,000 for this purpose ("National", 1997).

In 1998, the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) announced that a film commission would be set up for the purpose of financing and promoting local films for company sponsorship, as well as expediting permits for overseas movie-makers who wanted to film in Singapore – usually a lengthy, bureaucratic process ("New Commission", 1998). It would be managed by a committee consisting of people from the industry⁴: production, distribution, and exhibition professionals, NAC, as well as other organisations with an interest in

⁴ Among other influential film industry leaders, David Glass, President of Golden Village – Singapore's largest chain of market-leader multi-cineplexes – has agreed to be part of the management team (Khoo, interview, 1998).

filmmaking ("New Commission", 1998). In this film commission, a funding mechanism would be set up and run like a unit trust or equity fund: banks, individuals, companies (and other investors who do not necessarily have a direct knowledge in filmmaking) would be able to invest money into this fund. There would be a specified investment period as well as a flat rate of return at the end of the term. Tan (interview, 1998) affirms that the trust fund should be established by the end of 1998, and sees that as the medium-to-long-term solution for solving the basic issue of financial support for the making of local films.

Independent Filmmaking and Commercial Distribution

Theoretically, with financial resources or the right connections, local filmmakers can release their own films in cinemas and expect to be paid a percentage of the box office collection (Lim, interview, 1998). In reality, this method poses great difficulty to an independent filmmaker, especially in regards to exhibition outside the domestic market. Usually, the only way for the film to travel is if it is picked up by an international film distribution company.

Multinational corporations such as Cathay Organisation or Golden Village (GV) – two of Singapore's largest cinema operators, movie production houses, distributors and exhibitors – contribute an important function in this instance. With footholds in Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan and China (and still expanding), a film under GV's distribution has the potential to be shown to a large transnational audience.

In 1997, all the three local films made – *The Road Less Traveled*, *God Or Dog* and *12-Storeys* – were bought by GV for distribution. Usually, local filmmakers would seek help from the Singapore Film Society to get their completed film approved by GV for distribution. Primarily cinema operators and film exhibitors/distributors in Singapore, GV was not usually involved in production activity (although they did make movies in Australia

and the United States). However, in the case of *The Road Less Traveled* (1997), GV – for the first time – bought the film on the basis of its script before it was completed.

Co-Productions and Commercial Filmmaking

Although local businessmen understand that funding films is risky, some are still willing to take the chance, especially if the films are co-productions, with good distribution channels and using better-known actors. For example, *Paradise Road* (1998) starring Meryl Streep did fairly well on US and Australian movie screens and had a decent run in Singapore. The movie might not be classed as a bona fide national film, having utilised international talent and shot in part in Malaysia; but as a major amount of the budget was invested by YTC Corporation (a Singapore company), Singapore stood to benefit financially – a filmmaking activity well in line with the government's revenue-generating considerations (Tan, interview, 1998).

One of the drawbacks filmmakers traditionally encounter has been the high cost of renting production facilities. However in recent years, partly due to the government's promotion of the vision of a viable film industry – and in an attempt to generate a sense of solidarity for long-term presumed mutual benefit – a close cooperation has sprung up between filmmakers, producers, cinema exhibitors and distributors (Goh, interview, 1997). *The Road Less Traveled* (1997) and *Money No Enough* (1998) had their production and post-production done at virtually cost price at JSP Productions, one of the biggest production companies in Singapore. When director Lim Suat Yen was working on *The Road Less Traveled* (1997), people from Cathay Organisation, post-production houses and others from the industry would visit the set, simply to give emotional support (Lim, interview, 1998).

Cinema Operators

Film producers and distributors such as GV have greatly shaped the development of the industry. With their existence, film exhibition has undergone a great transformation in Singapore. The country has long been among the world's most avid filmgoers in terms of per capita consumption (Wong, 1990), but in the late 70s and early 80s the film industry was badly hit by video competition and lack of strict enforcement in copyright laws. Movies were out on pirated videos six months before they were released in the cinemas. The industry thought that the exhibition trade was permanently in decline⁵ (Tan and Soh, 1994, p.140). However, in 1987 the Copyright Act was tightened which helped salvage the business.

At that time, the number of cinemas also meant the same number of buildings – there were no multiplexes. Then in the early 1990s, existing movie exhibitors such as Shaw and Cathay converted their cinemas into duplexes. In 1992, Golden Village entered the local market and became the first company to custom-build cineplexes with multiple halls and screens. Soh (1993) suggests that the film industry has benefited from the multiplexes' streamlining and optimising of resources. For example, with ten screens in one location, the exhibitor would need only one set of staff and ticket sellers, and one pool of cinema managers.

The consumer also has a wider variety of choice: Singapore's biggest cinema, Capitol, used to have 1668 seats – a huge auditorium. Unless they managed to sell all the seats, it was a waste of resources. A multiplex might have 1500 seats spread across six halls. The exhibitors can release a popular film to 1500 people by screening it simultaneously in all six cineplexes. Otherwise, they could simply screen the movie in the largest hall, and other less popular movies in smaller halls – a better utilisation of capacity.

⁵ Although there were seventy-two cinemas in 1978, just forty-one were left five years later. Some cinemas opened and closed in two years (Tan and Soh, 1994, p.141).

I would argue a downside to the construction of multiplexes: prior to their existence in Singapore, attending the cinemas would be an exciting event, as a large number of film-goers could watch one movie together on a giant screen. Now, with the proliferation of smaller halls and smaller screens, film exhibition space has diminished – and with it, a loss of experience. Economics would thus appear to take priority over the film-goer's sense of enjoyment.

Despite the fact that the price of cinema tickets has more than doubled since 1991, there has been a major growth in audience numbers, and cinema operators continue to expand their operations, building “more and better equipped” multiplex cinemas⁶ (“Singapore a paradise”, 1993). Competition is fierce and companies have to consolidate to secure business and film distribution rights.

In 1993, Cathay Organisation and Golden Village linked up to co-operate on film distribution and cinema management in Singapore. In 1994, Eng Wah Organisation went public with the aim of building more cinemas and upgrading existing ones into cineplexes. It also worked with Shaw Organisation on a joint venture to lease and operate cineplexes. Together, they created a new company called Shaw Theatres which invested S\$80 million to develop Singapore's largest cinema-entertainment complex in Suntec City (currently Singapore's largest shopping complex). In 1995, United Artists Theatre Circuit, one of the largest cinema operators in the world, opened a three-screen cineplex at Bugis Junction shopping complex (Choo, interview, 1997).

⁶ In 1987 there were forty-one cinemas operating in Singapore with a total seating capacity of 48,000 and an annual attendance of 19,762,000. In 1991 the number of cinemas had grown to fifty-five, with annual attendance of 20,655,000. Forty-six new screens were built in 1992 alone, and in 1994 the figures were 115 cinemas, 64,000 seats and annual attendance of 29,000,000 (Yearbook of Statistics 1995, 1995).

Screening local films

Before the construction of cineplexes, cinemas and distribution channels were limited and the chances that a local, independent filmmaker could screen his film at the same time as a popular Hollywood or Hong Kong movie were virtually nil – cinema operators had to maximise profit and fill capacity. Now, with the proliferation of screens and the rejuvenation of the cinema business, exhibitors are more willing to be flexible and experimental with the films they show (Choo, interview, 1997).

Major cinema operators such as Golden Village then, while attempting to satisfy their commercial objectives, also work closely with the arts and culture industry people. In fact, most international films the Singapore Film Society brings in are screened at GV cineplexes at Marina Square, a busy city shopping district in Singapore (Tan, interview, 1998).

Other Infrastructure

As highlighted above, there is a push for developing Singapore as a centre for the regional film industry and the construction of a S\$70 million Tang Dynasty Chinese Theme Village was one of the government initiatives to achieve that goal (Dhaliwal, 1991). Opened in January 1992, the theme park functions as a major set (with three studios) for both television and film production⁷. In the same year, an Association of Singapore Film and Video producers was also established to create closer ties and cooperation within the industry (Goh, 1991). Furthermore, Hong Kong's Cineasia Entertainment Group plans to establish additional production infrastructure in Singapore (partly funded by the government) (Yeo, interview, 1997).

⁷ So far, Mandarin Films (a Hong Kong company) has shot four Chinese films there – *All's Well Ends Well II* (1995), *Insanity* (1996), *Laughter of Water Margin* (1996), and *Satin Steel* (1997) (Choo, interview, 1998).

Problems of Development

Developing a national film industry is never simply a case of persuading corporate financiers of a real, immediate business opportunity. They know the high risks, and Singapore has not had the satisfactory track record it takes to convince most companies to dispense large amounts of money it takes to make even a low-budget feature film (no matter how patriotic they might be), and therefore local filmmakers still have to struggle to finance their projects⁸ (Montagu, 1964, p.193). If the new film commission trust fund is indeed set up as proposed, a potentially substantial amount could then come from public money, such as from NAC or EDB. The scheme would also shift the balance of risk and increase the possibility of securing private and corporate investment.

There are few benefits accruing to filmmaking in Singapore. While the government provides tax incentives for overseas filmmakers – because so few films are shot locally – this is offset by lack of affordable or sufficient production facilities (such as editing studios). Almost every local film made to-date has had to rent overseas facilities for post-production or sound effects. Khoo did all his negative cuts in Australia as there are no trained professionals for this particular craft in Singapore, while Dolby Sound for *A Road Less Traveled* was achieved in Thailand. Moreover, there is a shortage of experienced production personnel – *12 Storey*'s debut at the SIFF was delayed when the company hired to work the soundtrack backed out at the last minute (Khoo, interview, 1998). Talent is scarce too as there are few good television actors who can switch over to movies comfortably. If overseas filmmakers are looking for affordable places with great shooting locations they might, for the immediate future, think about neighbouring countries in Asia, such as Indonesia or Thailand.

⁸ To make *A Road Less Traveled*, Lim (interview, 1998) had to borrow S\$310,000 from friends, relatives and banks.

The competitive advantage of the Hong Kong film industry is so overwhelming that dominant influence of the Singapore film industry will not emerge in the region simply by the elimination of a few bureaucratic impediments⁹ and the construction of some fundamental film structures to allow local filmmaking to flourish ("Film industry", 1993). Although the government has taken steps to provide a growing pool of students with film training for the long-term sustenance of the industry, the question still exists as to whether there currently exists the talent and skills to build that industry. An Australian processing company, Atlab Film Processing set up a S\$4 million production laboratory in 1992, but it pulled out a year later citing a lack of work as the reason (Tan and Soh, 1994, p.139) – an affirmation that the country needs a critical mass of talent before industry can thrive¹⁰.

For Singapore to succeed, infrastructure must begin from the inside – and work its way out. Lim (interview, 1998) recalls a well-documented incident in the film industry when a well-known Hong Kong company, Best Friends Limited, moved to Singapore in 1991. It shifted back shortly after realising that Singapore did not have the relevant foundation and production system then to create good, technologically-superior films such as they were used to in Hong Kong.

This time round however, there is increased government assistance; a more liberal censorship system; a (soon to be established) practical funding mechanism; comparatively improved production and distribution facilities; and more local filmmakers willing to take the risk.. Tan (interview, 1998) predicts there should be no fewer than ten local films made annually by the turn of the century.

⁹ Brigadier-General George Yeo, the Minister for Information and the Arts, says that the government will review regulations to help the culture and entertainment industry grow, and act on rules that may be in the way.

¹⁰ The full-length feature film *A Road Less Traveled* (1997) was accomplished by the Ngee Ann Polytechnic pioneer batch of film students. To Tan (interview, 1998), that proves the skill and potential of locally-trained filmmakers.

Chapter Four

IMAGES OF LIGHT AND DARK :

PLURALITIES OF EXPRESSION IN NATIONAL FILM

At the national level, we see how a unity has been imposed on competing languages, religions, ideologies, and cultural practices. The elite will seek to display national identity as a representation of consensual unity, while those who are being marginalised and silenced in the process will, no doubt, have their own alternative versions. (Dissanayake, 1992, p.15)

In recent years, a number of things have altered in the worlds of the Singapore film and cinema industry, making the prospects for a sustained national film business seem brighter than they have been at any time since the 1970s. There is real promise for a full revival in Singapore film, in the existence of better structures of production and possibilities of finance. While my thesis is concerned with finance and legislation (enumerated in other chapters), artistic/cultural questions are clearly relevant to any discussion of a national cinema.

This chapter will take a look at some of the feature films that were made since the government's initiative to revive the industry in 1990: *Bugis Street* (1994), *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *Army Daze* (1996), *The Road Less Traveled* (1997) and *12 Storeys* (1997). Due to space constraints, I can only focus on two of the more popular movies (*Army Daze* and *12 Storeys*), but I wish to show that these national films, with their own distinct styles of representation, articulate in different ways a sense of what it means to belong to the nation, to be part of that national consciousness in the Singaporean context – images often in contention with the government's rosy picture of nationhood.

Contradictions in the Production of National Identity

One criticism which can be leveled against the concept of nationalism is that it often seeks to create the nation through a historically frozen and 'authentic' conception of identity, and an imaginary sense of unity -- but fails to take into account the variety of collective identities and forms of belonging (such as class, gender, ethnicity) which exist within the community. Chomsky (1989) recognises, "the fact that the voice of the people is heard in democratic societies is considered a problem to be overcome by ensuring that the public voice speaks the right words" (p.19). Despite the apparent positioning of Singapore as an 'open' society in recent years, it is still governed by a party which, for most parts, expects a single conforming view (Birch, 1993, p.52).

Foucault (cited in Schlesinger, 1990, p.78) talked about this as the 'power of normalisation': what is essential for the maintenance of power within a discourse of normalisation is not the creative production of new meanings, but the reproduction of the existing order as the legitimate culture imposing an "orthodoxy of interpretation upon cultural products or attitudes". Singaporeans can no longer be treated as uneducated children requiring paternal guidance and control, a system which had operated for years under Lee Kuan Yew. A newer strategy of control was required, and for the most part, this has rested upon 'Asianising' Singapore (and commending its good social values such as filial piety), while 'Othering' the West and denigrating its 'increasingly decadent' ways, so that its citizens can self-reflexively assert themselves in a rapidly modernising/liberalising world, but in fact be subtly controlled by that very 'Asian' nature. George Yeo (1994), Minister for Information and the Arts (MITA) says:

We must find ways to preserve our values and transmit them to subsequent generations. Without the right social values, we could not have made economic progress in the first place. If we lose these social values, we will surely go into decline. I am not saying that our own values should be static and not evolve, but we should not blindly follow the way many

western societies are going... Eastern societies have moved towards the centre while many Western societies are veering off to the other extreme. (p.105)

A highly regulated democracy, the mass media in Singapore is thus often used for what Hao (1996, p.112) terms “development journalism” – as a government apparatus to promote nation-building ideology. A national cinema is useful in that it can repudiate that hegemonic illusion of national unity and cohesiveness and show alternative views of nationhood.

Broadly speaking, one can divide films into three categories: popular, artistic and experimental. McIntyre (1994) suggests that, besides being commercial by nature, popular mainstream cinema often reinforces and strengthens the hegemony of the nation-state in diverse ways, maintaining the façade of a totalising and consensual nationhood at the cost of repressing and silencing the dispossessed. The power-wielders in any society strive to enhance their base by making use of all available media of communication at their disposal, and film is one of them. Many filmmakers willingly participate in this effort to reinforce the dominant idea of an essentialised and unitary nation-state.

However, analysing a film such as *Army Daze*, I will argue that commercial movies can (and are) used to challenge dominant ideology. Although they are designed to appeal to more viewers so as to secure maximum profit, filmmakers – through the utilisation of techniques such as humour, parody or satire – can offer alternative messages to the viewers. Unlike art and experimental movies which explicitly oppose dominant ideology, popular movies tend to employ a subtle approach. In fact, it might be legitimate to think that they are the best ways to offer alternate visions of the nation, as these films reach a much larger (and more receptive) audience than art movies.

The artistic filmmaker seeks to explore, through aesthetic treatment, facets of indigenous experiences. These films are designated as high art and get shown at international film festivals. I suggest that this genre does not totally abandon economic imperatives – Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* are arthouse movies that also managed to profit at the commercial box-office. Finally, the experimental film directors – much smaller in numbers and much less visible on the film scene – are committed to the construction of a counter cinema where opposition of dominant establishment is approached using innovative cinematic techniques (Dissanayake, 1992, p.8).

National cinema endeavours to be critical of the nation-state and its diverse social, political, cultural institutions and discourses. Often, the films seek counter-narrations and – to different extents – aim to de-stabilise the ideological strategies by means of which imagined communities are given essentialist (national) identities. They serve to highlight the ambivalent unities, marginalised voices, and oppositional discourses that inhabit the national space. In this way, national films constitute a corrective of sorts, a way of asserting not only the individual members of a nation, but joint members as an alternative, however peripheral, in relation to hegemonic mainstream films (Soila, Widding & Iversen, 1998, p.4).

Singapore Films and the Marginalised Voices¹

In 1994, Hong Kong director Yang “Yon Fan” Man Shih made *Bugis Street* (RA), a film about an innocent 16-year-old Malaysian maid working in a sleazy hotel. *Bugis Street* takes a look at the lives of transvestites in the 1970s – a scandalous subculture in which the government has traditionally tried to conceal – and includes numerous graphic heterosexual and transsexual sex scenes.

¹ See APPENDIX II for a data sheet on all Singapore films made since 1991.

Mee Pok Mun (RA) came out in 1995 and had the dual distinction of being the first local movie to make a profit, as well as having an all-Singaporean cast and crew (which inspired other local filmmakers to follow suit in later movies) ("Reel life", 1995, p.40). Directed by Eric Khoo, this art film reveals the city's seedy underside in the shadow of its bustling marble office towers, painting a sordid, realistic view of Singapore with an obsessive preoccupation on money, sex and fame – an image startlingly different from the usual sterile, modern, repressive depiction of Singapore. Cinema-goers were also touched by the sad story of an intellectually-challenged noodle seller who falls in love with a weary prostitute who frequents his stall; hence the film performed reasonably well at the box-office ("Reel life", 1995, p.40).

In late 1996, a much touted "true-blue Singaporean film, made by Singaporeans *for* Singaporeans" materialised in the form of *Army Daze* (PG), a comedy about a mixed-racial group of army recruits. The movie's advertising slogan apparently worked, making it Singapore's largest local commercial success at that time. Moreover, like the rite of passage that is compulsory NS (National Service) for male Singaporeans, *Army Daze* was considered a rite of passage for the Singapore film industry (Rodrigues, 1996, p.15); besides being the country's first mainstream comedy feature, it also signaled a return of film distributor/ exhibitor Cathay Organisation to local movie production since the 1970s.

The plot: Five young men from various backgrounds (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian) stumble through military obstacle courses on their way to manhood. There is Malcolm, the well-bred, overweight nerd and sheltered mother's boy; Ah Beng the boor ('Ah Beng' is incidentally a local euphemism meaning a crass, unrefined Chinese guy with bad dress sense); Ah Huay, Ah Beng's sister ('Ah Huay' is the local euphemism for the female counterpart of 'Ah Beng'); Johari the 'cool' Malay teenager who walks with the gait of Black-American rappers and who is

never without his giant headphones; Kenny the effeminate, flamboyant, creative gay; and Krishna and Lathi, archetypal versions of lovers seen in Tamil movies (Rodrigues, 1996, p.16-17).

Army Daze offers no fast action, stunts or high-tech special effects. Add to that, a modest production budget of S\$700,000 (about A\$630,000), a working crew of mostly inexperienced film students, and a director (Ong Keng Sen) and scriptwriter (Michael Chiang) who (until then) only had a background in theatre. Yet it became a huge local success, reaping profits of S\$1.6 million at the box office (Hiebert, 1997, p.69). According to Chiang, *Army Daze* has the elements of familiarity and humour, and therein lies its strength². He suggests that a tried-and-tested theme often holds greater appeal than the new, if only because audiences are more accepting of the (happily) expected:

Because NS is an instantly recognisable Singaporean phenomenon, people want to see how these five boys cope, or see a little bit of themselves, their boyfriends or brothers in the characters, never mind that they know how the story will turn out. (Chiang, interview, 1997)

Moreover, *Army Daze*, being a light, funny formulaic flick, was the least risky way for Cathay Film Organisation to re-enter a field it had been out of touch with. The CEO of Cathay, Choo Meileen says:

Art-house movies were not, and still are not, a privilege we can afford. To break in (to the movie market), we had to go commercial. *Army Daze* was ideal because it had all the right ingredients: light, funny, and close to the Singaporean's heart. The theme has timeless local appeal. (interview, 1997)

² In its original incarnation, *Army Daze* the book (published in 1985) was a huge local bestseller, and its stage version (both by Michael Chiang) met with rousing success in three performances of 1987, 1990 and 1995.

National Service is after all a unique local experience (with the possible exception of Taiwan). Every Singaporean male is duty-bound to serve NS and almost every family has either a brother, son, relative or friend who has been through, is in, or will enter this rite of passage. It is precisely the interestingly 'uninteresting day-in-the-life-of' story locals can identify with that made it so popular.

I would suggest here that a foreign audience might not have appreciated the qualities of the movie. The humour, derived from a mishmash of languages and dialects – English, Mandarin, Malay and Hokkien – is a crucial factor in the movie and an amusing (but accurate) dramatization of popular slang used by locals (and therefore which only a local can fully grasp). This linguistic element would be lost in the dubbing or subtitling for foreign viewers. Moreover, unless one is familiar with the local popular youth culture and the cultural idiosyncracies of the various stereotypical character genres, the film would be stripped of its meaningful parody (Roderigues, 1996, p.15). In this respect, Singaporeans realise that the distinctive language and images presented in the film dispense an identity which exist only in their context.

Army Daze deals optimistically with cultural assimilation and its beneficent consequences – a trait characteristic of films made in most Asian countries where cinema is used strategically to reinforce the myth of a unified nation (Dissanayake, 1992). The camaraderie of the recruits (all from different races) neatly ties in with the government's promotion of racial tolerance and nationalism. On the surface, it would thus appear that what Singapore's first popular national film achieved is a confirmation of national values as defined by the government. Its overt themes are: The solid discipline of the army; patriotic males going into national service so as to prepare themselves (when the need arose) to defend and sacrifice themselves for their country; the incredible lack of tension or lawlessness in such close quarters among people from different

racess, religions and backgrounds; the good, educated kid who respects and listens to his parents; the enthusiastic youngster who starts training long before being conscripted; and so on. *Army Daze* might be a one-and-a-half-hour promotional campaign that came straight from the Ministry of Community Development's press office.

However, a closer scrutiny of the themes implicit in the film will yield a different analysis. Chiang (interview, 1997) uses comedy to mask his criticism of the bureaucratic construction of a seamless, unified society. His drawing upon of a common experience (ie. national service) has the intended effect of making viewers recognise the actual harshness of army life – scenes of heads being shorn clean, drab uniformity and gruelling drills – interspersed with emotional personal problems: Krishna faces the threat of losing his girlfriend³; Kevin's frustration and loneliness. The latter's effeminate nature is shown to be a stigma, a disgrace against the moral values of his family and nation, therefore his father wants him to go into the army to "become a man". Chiang also touches subtly on the issue of Singaporeans migrating (a topic which has long concerned the government, worried as they are about a "brain-drain") – an implicit criticism of the high cost of living and an oppressive political climate which have caused many of Singapore's brightest talents to leave for other countries, where they can experience a better quality of life.

It can be argued from a decidedly "feel-good" film such as this, that commercial movies can, nonetheless, carry dark undertones. In *Army Daze*, Chiang conveys effectively, through humour, the darker side of the national experience. His surreptitious construction of a reality (quite unlike the grand picture one usually sees in army advertisements) creates a final doubt – that it

³ Because national service lasts for a period of at least two years and recruits usually only get to leave their camps during the weekends (sometimes not at all), it is difficult to sustain a relationship.

is possible for five men from such different cultures and backgrounds to become the best of friends within a matter of months.

1997 was considered extremely optimistic for local films, as three were made that year. One of them, *The Road Less Traveled* (G), was a Mandarin movie which highlights young people's frustrations as they pursue their artistic dreams – a field deemed unprofitable (and thus impractical) in the materialistic society of Singapore which covets the prestige of higher-paying vocations (Lau, 1997, p.24). Another film, Eric Khoo's second full-length feature, *12 Storeys* (PG) depicts a day in the life of three households in a drab government-subsidised Housing Development Board (HDB) block⁴. More than 70% of Singaporeans live in public housing which dominate the landscape, so they figure in the lives and consciousness of most of the population (Whang, 1997, p.50).

Flats began appearing on the Singapore landscape shortly after the island-state gained independence in 1965, as a solution to the land shortage. They replaced the wood and attap houses (kampung) that were common earlier. While sanitary and electrical facilities in kampung houses were inadequate, the open-style architecture allowed people to share a communal bond. This togetherness was lost when the kampungs were demolished and families were relocated to flats. In many cases, a feeling of isolation and alienation set in (Rodrigues, 1997, p.38). Only in recent years have the authorities begun to address the image of public housing by repainting the buildings. But for the majority, these tenements are still the dull, grey structures found across the island; furthermore, the construction of a HDB flat is such that it shields from prying eyes the dreary lives of families within these boxed-in units.

⁴ The film's title is taken from the number of floors in a typical HDB block.

Khoo attempts to show the dark side of HDB living in *12 Storeys*:

- A bride from China is frustrated to discover that her husband, Ah Gu, isn't as rich as he first claimed, and refuses to sleep with him (while engaging in an extramarital affair).
- While Ming's parents go overseas, he has the task of looking after his 'cool' younger siblings, Tee and Trixie. A nerdy, socially inept and domineering young man, Ming admonishes his siblings to eat a healthy breakfast so as "to become more productive" and frowns on Trixie's scanty dressing and jobless boyfriend.
- A fat, lonely middle-aged spinster, San San, is tormented by her insufferable, cantankerous old mother and later commits suicide by jumping off her block.

12 Storeys aims to present the dynamics of social interaction amongst the flat-dwellers, and significantly, the competitive nature of society. At a lift landing, a concerned father persuades a teacher living on the same storey to tutor his child. A number of scenes are set in a coffee shop – blue-collared workers chat over bottles of beer, making insensitive remarks about San San's suicide and espousing the superstitious belief that buying lottery numbers of her death-date will secure a win.

Presented in English and Mandarin, with smatterings of dialects, the film is insistently topical in its concerns: For example, the stereotype of the materialistic, conniving China bride is given much publicity in the local press, and young Singaporeans' lack of knowledge of their country's history also gets an airing. No where in the film does Khoo acknowledge the country's economic success, stern penal code, growth rates or GDP figures (of which the government is constantly reminding its citizens). Instead, one of his characters, Tee, spouts morbid statistics about Singapore's high suicide rate and the annual murder count (there were fifty-two murders in 1995, one a week, which is more than Hong Kong's during the same period). He also makes

fun of his elder brother, Ming, who wants to be the head of the household, and together with sister Trixie, chips away at Ming's authority.

Most Singaporeans grapple with an authoritarian environment on a daily basis, probably the reason why they support the underdog who rebels against the establishment. It can be argued that *12 Storeys* was popular, both at film festivals and with the local audience, due to its dark, irreverent look at the lives of Singaporeans in the government's efficiently-made public housing: its themes are the antithesis to the government's ideological portrayals of a prosperous, happy, united community. Khoo presents the cracks that have appeared in the country's social fabric and brings the audience into his characters' habitat to show what statistics and surveys cannot convey – the despair of some lives that live within. The film depicts the desperation of truncated hopes, of families let down by the Singapore dream: material comfort for Ah Gu's wife, social popularity for Meng, and for San San, a loving husband and children callously depicted in the 'Happy Family' ads beaming out of her living room television.

Khoo suggests that many of the doctrines promoted by the government are not elixirs guaranteed to cure society's ills. In fact, many problems which exist within the family or community, arise *because* of the 'Asian' values which Singaporeans are obliged to practise:

- Children have to achieve good academic results, otherwise they are useless and the whole family is shamed – therefore the need for tutors (and lots of extra studying after school).
- Filial piety is the ultimate doctrine, therefore verbal (and to a limited extent, physical) abuse by parents is to be naturally endured. The child has to repay their kindness for birth and upbringing, by taking care of them till they pass away. To do otherwise would be tantamount to being un-'Asian' and inhumane – one would risk being ostracised by society (not to mention the threat of being legally court-martialled for desertion).

San San's silent acceptance of the daily verbal abuse inflicted by her elderly mother and her subsequent suicide seems to sweep aside the notion of family values and filial piety which have traditionally been upheld as an important Asian value. Government campaigns are also mocked in *12 Storeys*, like the ones promoting a 'gracious society' and 'Courtesy is a way of life'; or the "My block is the cleanest" slogan emblazoned on one of the characters' T-shirt. How superficial these ideologies, how irrelevant to sordid reality as the characters, trapped in their tiny flats, simmer, than implode.

Films like *Mee Pok Man*, *Bugis Street* and *12 Storeys* consist of various bleak themes or tales of social misfits subsisting in Singapore's society that are nothing short of shocking by the country's standards. They are important in that they oppose the constructed, 'mainstream' identity offered by the hegemonic powers, challenging the vision the government has constructed of the stable, unified nation made up of a solitary voice. Instead, this national cinema shows the dark representations of the existence of fragmented communities and displaced individuals in a nation – too often obscured or ignored by bureaucratic propaganda.

Although every film is a cultural product (and even the decision to invest in a film is a cultural decision – an assessment of the state of cultural values as mediated through the marketplace), it is usually only with certain films and a certain type of cinema that 'culture' becomes a reason for production when the money runs out: and they are usually the films that speak the voices of not just the mainstream, but also marginal groups (Nowell-Smith, 1985, p149).

CONCLUSION

Film is an amalgam of people – producers, capitalists, stars, directors, distributors, critics, viewers – and the functions and structures of institutions that encompass and designate these people into roles and relationships – studios, banks, theatres, multinationals, audiences. It also has to do with relations between and among nations, between the few countries that produce, export, and profit from film and the many countries that primarily import but also struggle to produce their own films (Buck, 1992, p.115). Because wealthy, prolific film industries like the United States and Hong Kong dominate heavily their respective English and Chinese language movie market, it is necessary to look at how this domination has hampered – and continues to hamper – the growth of national film industries such as Singapore.

Filmmaking involves unique properties of production and distribution. Film production (even for a relatively inexpensive film) is capital intensive at the point of production. To come up with just a single master copy of a feature film involves outlays of capital for studio space and on-location shooting costs, film stock, cameras and camera operators, editors, acting talents, soundtrack, scriptwriting, special effects and so forth (Montagu, 1964). A major studio may easily spend millions of US dollars for a single film, a venture requiring financing on such a grand scale filmmakers in few countries can command.

With wide distribution channels, films enjoy great economies of scale. This is especially true of American films – and to a lesser extent Hong Kong – because of their well-developed systems of domestic and international distribution and promotion. A single film title, reproduced in sufficient prints and screened on domestic and international screens, can be

shown to millions of people. The same film can be sold at different prices to different countries, depending on variations in government policies, per capita income, and the structure and extent of cinema distribution within countries (Buck, 1992, p.117). Once the costs of production are recouped, additional showings in cities throughout the world produce revenues that are mostly profit.

Language is a factor which has boosted Hollywood and Hong Kong. Besides the US, there are a number of countries with large movie markets where English is the primary language, including Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. This linguistically defined market can be extended to further include countries where sizeable proportions of the population speak English, such as Europe, Philippines, India and Singapore. Conversely, Asia being the fastest-growing world film market – having surpassed Latin America and second only to Europe – is the dominant consumer base of Hong Kong films: watched by its own seven million people, China's significantly huge population, Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia; and not withstanding Chinese-descended immigrants from all over the world (Magnier, 1991).

The availability of large-scale financing for American or Hong Kong films, supported by their cultural influence and large market, favour their film industry – concurrently, their profitability attracts talent, capital, and opportunities to make more films. The industries' advanced technology and skill also account for their worldwide box-office appeal. There is the existing threat that, when locally-made films barely turn a profit or even lose money, good Singapore filmmakers might tire of searching for finance and leave the country, while young talents are afraid of the high risks. It would simply become cheaper and easier to import the films from overseas.

The success of these dominant sectors thus works against the development of industries in smaller countries. It is exceedingly difficult for smaller countries such as Singapore to find willing sponsors - obviously, local banks and investment companies would be more attracted to films that are likely to make money, bypassing investments in their own national film industry for foreign films where profit margins are higher and more predictable.

It has been almost a decade since the government's initiative for the development of the Singapore film industry in 1990. Finally though, the pace of development is starting to pick up. A brief summary of Singapore's film track record in the last eight years shows the industry's slow, but steady progress in recent years. Since *Medium Rare* in 1991, there were no local feature films produced until 1994 with *Bugis Street*. A year later, Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* hit the screens. Then in late 1996, Singapore's first successful commercial comedy, *Army Daze*, was produced by Cathay Organisation. 1997 saw a sudden spurt in the number of films as *God Or Dog*, *The Road Less Traveled*, and *12 Storeys* were released that year. Presently in 1998, *Forever Fever* and *Money No Enough* have started screening at the cinemas. At the time of writing this, I have been unable to view the movies due to their very recent release in Singapore. However, it is important to discuss the substantial impact these two new local films might have contributed to the industry.

Forever Fever is a nostalgic look at Singapore back in the 70s disco era, the story of a man who joins a dancing competition¹. Noteworthy of the movie is that even before it graced local screens, Australian distributor Beyond Films had signed for the rights to release it in Australia and New Zealand (Tong, 1998). The movie also screened at the Cannes Film

¹ The movie has been accused by some critics of being a replica of *Saturday Night Fever*, put in a Singapore context. Director Glenn Goei insists that he is actually paying homage to the John Travolta movie by giving the audience an enjoyable look back at that period ("Goei", 1998).

Festival, where US Miramax Films executives saw it and -- out of 500 films shown there -- bought its distribution rights for Britain, United States and Canada. The film has also been bought by other companies for distribution in Germany, Spain, France, Poland, the Netherlands, South Africa, Israel and India. In all, it will be seen in nineteen foreign countries, and will later make an appearance at international film festivals such as Toronto, Milan and Sundance. The film has made US\$3 million from the various deals, about three times its budget of S\$1.5 million, and director Glenn Goei is the first Asian director that Miramax -- known for movies such as *The English Patient* and *Pulp Fiction* -- has contracted to make three movies over the next five years² ("Glen Goei", 1998).

Money No Enough is the most recent local film to come out on the screens, but it has already become the third top grossing film of all time in Singapore. A Chinese-language comedy (with smatterings of dialects and other languages), about the materialistic Singaporean's perpetual search for 'more money', it earned S\$4.79 million in ticket sales as of late June 1998³ ("Jack Neo", 1998).

One can argue that 'Singapore Cinema' describes two things: firstly, an industrial structure -- capital, infrastructure, personnel -- producing films for the national and international markets with a principally Singapore investment in local agencies, talents and labour. Secondly, it implies a certain Singaporean-ness in the resulting product, something which establishes these films as meaningfully national. Although the industry is new, having made only nine full-length features since 1991, the most current two movies have doubtless been successful

² A *Forever Fever* sequel might be in the deal.

³ The movie displaced *Jurassic Park* from its third spot, which grossed S\$4.7 million. *The Lost World* is now in second place with S\$6.22 million and *Titanic* at number one with S\$6.42 million ("Jack Neo", 1998).

in encouraging the growth and morale of the local industry, paving the way for the production of future Singaporean movies.

It is unthinkable that Singapore films would ever be able to compete with say, movies from the US. It might also be many years before they can be on par with the quality and popularity of Hong Kong Chinese films. Furthermore, the recent Asian economic crisis could have an adverse effect on the future growth of the film industry. But as Hill (1992) observes, national cinema is worth defending precisely because it is capable of registering the complexities of life among a nation's members – the potential for the representation of multiculturalism offered by this media form is significant. Moreover, films can be examined as a way of understanding the culture from which they emerge and into which they make an intervention. Eric Khoo (interview, 1998) reiterates that neither money nor censorship is a necessary impediment to making national cinema: "If a filmmaker knows that there are limitations, he can still work within those limitations – and make the film work."

As the different aspects – filmmaking, cinema-going, economics and culture – do not exist in isolation from each other, a balance needs to be reached between film content and marketability. But as long as Singaporeans can find a comfortable niche in which their films have something interesting to say about the social and cultural climate of the country, there ought to be a market for these creations, both domestic and transnational.

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Appendix I

Interviews

Chiang, Michael. (1997, December). Writer of the book, stageplay, and scriptwriter for the movie adaptation of *Army Daze*.

Choo, Meiling. (1997, December). Chief Executive Officer of Cathay Movie Organisation.

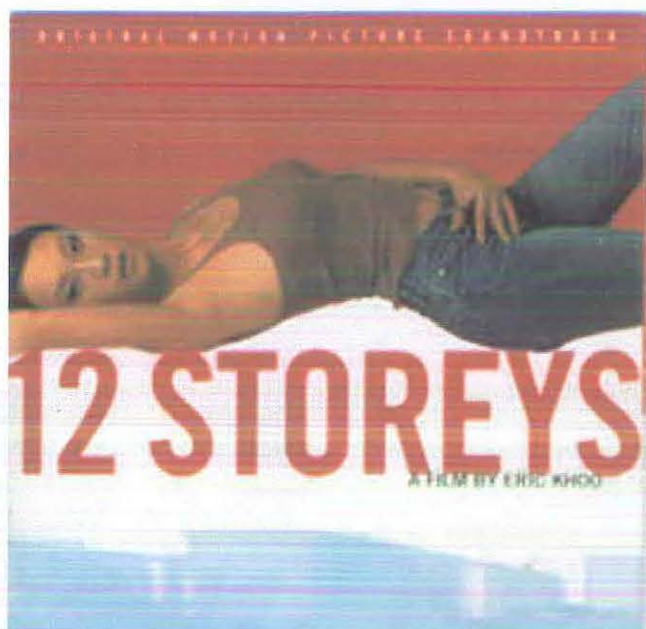
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Khoo, Eric. (1998, February). Director of *12 Storeys*, *Mee Pok Man*, *Pain*.

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Tan, Kenneth. (1998, January). A pioneer member of the Singapore Film Society, he has been its Chairman since 1984. Also Chairman for the national Arts Resource Panel for film.

Yeo, George. (1997, August). Minister for Information and the Arts (MITA). Also Brigadier-General of the Singapore Armed Forces.



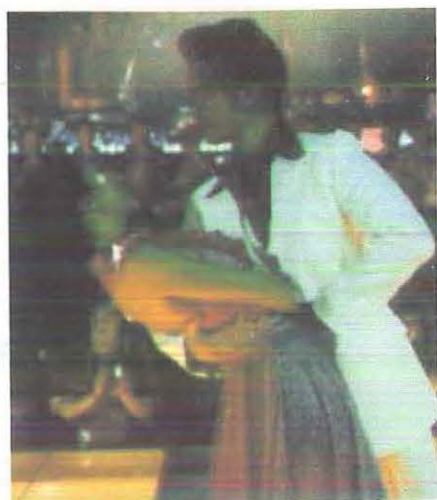
BUGIS STREET (RA) 1994

GOD OR DOG (RA) 1997

12 STOREYS (PG) 1997

MEE POK MAN (RA) 1995

ARMY DAZE (PG) 1996



FOREVER FEVER (PG) 1998

Appendix II

Singapore Films Data Sheet (1991-1998)

Army Daze (PG), 1996

Comedy, 80 mins

<i>Director</i>	Ong Ken Sen
<i>Screenplay</i>	Michael Chiang (based on the stage play by Michael Chiang)
<i>Producer</i>	Choo Meileen (Cathay Film Organisation)
<i>Cast</i>	Kenny (Kevin Mark Verghese), Malcolm (Edward Yong), Johari (Sheikh Haikel), Krishna (Ahamed Azad)
<i>Budget</i>	S\$700,000
<i>Box Office Gross</i>	S\$1.6 million

Premise Five army recruits of different races and backgrounds come together for compulsory national service, becoming best of friends while undergoing a life-changing experience.

Remarks The first commercial comedy film, and also the highest grossing local movie then.

Bugis Street (RA), 1994

Arthouse, 101 mins

<i>Director</i>	Yon Fan
<i>Writer</i>	Yon Fan
<i>Cast</i>	Hiep Thi Le, Michael Lam, Benedict Goh, Ernest, Maggie Lye
<i>Box Office</i>	Loss (undisclosed amount)

Premise A naïve teenage girl moves to Singapore's red-light district and quickly matures working as a maid in a hotel for transsexual and transvestite prostitutes.

Remarks Picked up for release in the US after a film programmer saw it at the 1994 SIFF.

Forever Fever (PG), 1998

Drama / Comedy, 95 mins

Director Glen Goei
Writer Glenn Goei
Produced by Tiger Tiger Productions Pte Ltd.
Distributor Shaw Organisation (Singapore)
Cast Adrian Pang (Ah Hock), Annabelle Francis (Julie), Medaline Tan (Mei), Steven Lim (Boon), Pierre Png (Richard).
Budget S\$1.5 million
Box-office S\$4.85 million – including distribution contracts – as of June 1998 (still screening at the time of writing).

Premise A nostalgic look at Singapore during the 70's disco era, when a young man joins a dancing competition for the prize money, to buy a motorbike.

Remarks To be distributed in nineteen countries, including Australia, New Zealand, UK, US, Canada, Germany, Spain, France, Poland, the Netherlands, South Africa, Israel and India. It has also been screened at the Cannes Film Festival, and will soon be showing at other international film festivals such as Toronto, Milan and Sundance.

God Or Dog (RA), 1997

Drama / Arthouse, 86 Mins

Director Hugo Ng
Cast Hugo Ng (Arthur Sin), Tay Teow Li (Ah Lian), Tammy Chan (Wendy)
Written by Hugo Ng
Produced by Golden Village
Budget S\$1 million
Box Office Loss (undisclosed amount)

Premise The second screen adaptation of the true story of Adrian Lim, a cult leader who pretends to have supernatural abilities and preys on the superstitions of

the vulnerable. He subsequently rapes, kills, and drinks the blood of two young children in an effort to 'retain' his so-called powers, and is finally caught and executed.

Remarks It was screened at the 1997 Singapore International Film Festival.

Medium Rare (R), 1991

Drama / Thriller

<i>Director</i>	Tony Yeow
<i>Producer</i>	Errol Pang
<i>Cast</i>	Dore Kraus (Daniel Wong), Jamie Marshall (Kathy), Margaret Chan (Yoke Lin)
<i>Budget</i>	S\$1.7 million
<i>Box Office</i>	Loss (undisclosed amount)

Premise The first loose adaptation of the real-life story of Adrian Lim, about a cult leader who rapes and murders two young children in a bid to achieve immortality.

Remarks The lead cast and essential crew members were foreigners.

Mee Pok Man (RA), 1995

Drama / Arthouse

<i>Director</i>	Eric Khoo
<i>Cast</i>	Joe Ng, Michelle Goh
<i>Budget</i>	S\$100,000
<i>Box Office Gross</i>	S\$400,000

Premise The tragic love story of a noodle-seller and a world-weary prostitute who frequents his stall.

Remarks: Won two special jury prizes at the Singapore International Film Festival, and screened at more than forty other film festivals.

Money No Enough (PG), 1998

Comedy

<i>Director</i>	Jack Neo
<i>Actor</i>	Jack Neo, Mark Lee

<i>Box Office Gross</i>	S\$4.79 million as of late June 1998 (still screening at the time of writing).
<i>Premise</i>	A look at the lives of materialistic Singaporeans in their never-ending search for money.
<i>Remarks</i>	The third top grossing film of all time in Singapore at this period.

The Road Less Travelled (G), 1997

Drama

<i>Director</i>	Lim Suat Yen
<i>Cast</i>	Robin Goh (Ah-jie), Chua Li Lian (Shiyun), Belinda Lee (Maoban), Ching Weichoon (Youzhong)
<i>Budget</i>	S\$350,000
<i>Box Office</i>	Loss (undisclosed amount)
<i>Premise</i>	About the anguish and frustrations of four Singaporeans as they strive towards dreams of making it big in the nation's small-scale folk-music industry.

12 Storeys (PG), 1997

Arthouse / Drama, 35mm, 100 mins

<i>Director</i>	Eric Khoo
<i>Producer</i>	Brian Hong
<i>Screenwriters</i>	Eric Khoo, James Toh
<i>Cinematographer</i>	Ho Yoke Weng
<i>Cast</i>	Koh Boon Pin (Ming), Jack Neo (Ah Gu), Chuan Yi Fong (Lili), Lum May Yee (Trixie), Lucilla Teoh (San San)
<i>Budget</i>	S\$300,000
<i>Box Office</i>	Profit (undisclosed amount)
<i>Premise</i>	A look at the troubled lives of three families staying in a government-subsidised apartment block.
<i>Remarks</i>	The film screened at the 1997 Singapore International Film Festival where it won the Critics Prize and the Young Cinema Award. It played at the Cannes Film Festival to full houses. A distributor picked up the film to be released in France.

ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information,
Bangkok (COCI). (1993).

"Making Films in ASEAN Countries:
A Guide to Film Legislation, Values and Taboos"

Making film in Singapore
Part 1 : On Film Legislation

INTRODUCTION

1. The Board of Film Censors (BFC) under the Ministry of Information and the Arts censors theatrical films, video tapes and video discs. It also licenses persons who are in the business of exhibition, distribution, production and import of video tapes/discs. The censorship and licensing provisions are contained in the Films Act 1981.
2. The Ministry of Law administers the Copyright Act 1987, which provides copyright protection for films and other intellectual property.
3. The Customs and Excise Department of the Ministry of Finance, Revenue Division administers and enforces the following Acts and Rules pertaining to taxation on films :
 - i) The Cinematograph Film Hire Duty Act 1970 (rev. 1985)
 - ii) The Cinematograph Film Hire Duty Rules 1972
 - iii) The Entertainments Duty Act 1970 (rev. 1985)
 - iv) The Entertainments Duty Rules 1972
 - v) The Entertainments Duty Order 1985
4. The Public Entertainments Licensing Unit under the Ministry of Home Affairs licenses exhibition of films in cinemas and public places under the Public Entertainments Act, 1970 (rev. 1985).

PART II

ON

VALUES AND TABOOS

INTRODUCTION

The impact of films is powerful and their influence pervading. Films, besides entertaining, impart values and norms. Hence, films and videotapes are carefully scrutinised for the values portrayed in them. Those that portray respect for law and order, racial harmony and traditional ASEAN values, etc, are encouraged, unlike those that promote sex and pornography, bizarre lifestyles and undesirable social behaviours, etc. Films that exert undesirable influence would have their impact reduced by suitable excisions to the films and, in severe cases, by a ban on exhibition and distribution.

STANDARD FORMAT FOR VALUES AND TABOOS

VALUES

TABOOS

SOCIO-CULTURAL

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Respect racial sensitivities: promote and preserve racial harmony. 2 Uphold standards of public morality and decency. 3 Preserve and promote Asian values, e.g. filial piety; respect for elders; care for the aged; the sanctity of marriage; the importance of fidelity; moral integrity in interpersonal relationships; interests of the family/society before one's own self-interests. 4 Respect for life, and for law and order. | <p>Portrayals offending the sensitivities of any race;</p> <p>Arouse resentment or hatred against any race;</p> <p>Promote chauvinistic views of any race.</p> <p>Pornography, scenes of copulation and explicit sex acts.</p> <p>Perverted sex, e.g. homosexuality, lesbianism and incest.</p> <p>Glorification of free love and sexual promiscuity.</p> <p>Sympathetic treatment of immorality, cohabitation, adultery and permissives</p> <p>Bizarre or vulgar life-styles that undermine/erode established virtues, e.g. those of bikers and punks. Obsession with the occult.</p> <p>Anti-social behaviour, e.g. hooliganism; vandalism; juvenile delinquency, gangsterism and drug addiction. Glorification of violence such as brutal killings, cruelty and torture. Detailed portrayal of how crime is committed and the technique.</p> |
|---|---|

VALUES

TABOOS

ECONOMIC

1. Discipline and work ethic: productivity; pride in work; strive for excellence.

Portrayals that would contribute to the undermining of industrial peace, e.g. use of subversion, sabotage and violence in the workplace and industrial action to resolve disputes

POLITICAL

Preserve democracy and maintain good relationship with neighbouring and other countries.

Ideologies which subvert the socio-political fabric, or which are inimical to democratic systems of government, e.g. the depiction in communist propaganda of class differences and struggles in society.

RELIGION

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Uphold and maintain religious harmony. | <p>Denigrating and criticising any particular religion.</p> |
|---|---|

The 'Last Blood', the first movie by a Singapore-based company, is by no means the last of such efforts. Hotshot Taiwanese director Chu Yen Ping talks to KOH SIEW TIN about the pros and cons of filming in Singapore.

On location: Singapore



Taiwanese director Chu Yen Ping will shoot half of his new movie, *Da Xiao Lao Qian*, here.

POSITIVE feedback about filming in Singapore has prompted prominent Taiwanese director Chu Yen Ping to set up an office and shoot his latest film here.

Chu will lead a filming crew here at the end of the month to shoot the outdoor footage for his new film, *Da Xiao Lao Qian* (which loosely translates as *Swingers Big And Small*).

This will be the second film made by a Singapore-based film company. The first was *The Last Blood*, shot here last year by Movie Impact, which is partly owned by Hongkong director/comedian Eric Tsang.

Teaming up with Chu, currently Taiwan's most popular commercial director, are equally big names — Samo Hung and Sandra Ng (Kwan Yui from Hongkong and Tuo Chung Hua, Taiwan's hottest screen property).

Chu disclosed details about his latest filming project when he was in town last week to

discuss details with the Economic Development Board's (EDB) Creative Services Unit.

He was accompanied by Wade C. Yao, his partner and producer of the movie. Their Singapore office, Yen Ping Film Production, is located at Battery Place.

The new movie, half of which will be shot here, is a mixture of comedy and action (*gongfu* stunts, not bloody violence, said Chu).

Samo Hung plays a compulsive gambler and divorcee with a six-year-old son. He is thrown into prison for an offence and, there, meets a woman cop (Sandra Ng) who is widowed with a three-year-old boy. The romance that blossoms between both single parents and their relationships with the children will provide the heartwarming moments in the film.

The movie's budget is between S\$2.5 and S\$3.5 million, sizeable by Taiwan standards.



Sandra Ng and Samo Hung will be among the stars who will be filming in Singapore.

About one-third will be for paying the cast.

Chu said he was encouraged to shoot in Singapore after he had positive feedback from Wong Ching, who directed *The Last Blood*.

He added: "Wong Ching



told me filming here is perfectly safe and the police are ever so helpful. In Taiwan the mafia will come around demanding money. I end up hiring more bodyguards than actors just to do a scene."

He said filming in Hongkong

and Taiwan had been made more difficult by the strict restrictions regarding the shooting of scenes such as police stations, hotels and the airports. But in Singapore, Wong Ching had said the EDB had been helpful in such cases.

He said: "Copyright laws are also more strictly enforced here, unlike in Taiwan where piracy is so rampant that pirated copies are available even before a film makes it to the first midnight screening."

Chu was also keen to use Singapore as a backdrop because it would be a refreshing change for viewers who were by now tired of the familiar Hongkong and Taiwan scenes.

But filming in Singapore had its inconveniences too, Chu said, as there was no established film industry here.

He said: "For instance, there are no processing facilities and I cannot get to view what I have shot. Which means I cannot re-shoot right

away if a scene does not turn out well."

There are also no studios for indoor scenes and no locations to build sets. And the labour cost is rather high at the moment.

Chu first made his name in Taiwan with comedies such as *Kung Fu Kids* and *Clumsy Soldiers*, as well as action flicks such as *Seven Wolves* and its sequel.

Recently, Chu had turned to Hongkong for his leading men, casting well-known names such as Andy Lau to a Hong Kong Top Star and Jackie Chan and Tony Leung Ka Fai in *Burning Island*, which he just completed in the Philippines.

Da Xiao Lao Qian is expected to be released here for the June holidays. It will also be shown in Hongkong, Taiwan and Malaysia.

He will be back in a fortnight to scout for locations as well as audition for a lead actress and some child actors.

Can I say ban books and films that offend religions

Results show S'poreans feel racial harmony must be maintained

RELIGIOUS harmony is precious and it must be nurtured in a multi-racial society like Singapore. This message was voiced strongly in a survey to gauge changing moral values of Singaporeans and their attitudes towards sex and violence in the media. The 1,102 people interviewed for the Censorship Review Committee survey early this year were asked if books and films that offend religious groups should be allowed in Singapore. The majority of the respondents (73 per cent) said such books, magazines or films should be completely banned in Singapore. Mr Philip Tan, director, of Price Waterhouse Management Consultants, which conducted the survey, said the findings clearly show that "religion is an important factor in the lives of Singaporeans".

When presenting the survey findings on Monday, he said that as Singapore is a multi-racial society, most Singaporeans feel racial tolerance and racial harmony must be encouraged.

The survey found that among the six major religious groups, the Muslims and the Catholics were most in favour of a complete ban on these offensive films or publications (85 per cent).

The Taoists and Buddhists and those with no religion were less disapproving.

The survey also asked Singaporeans for their views on films and or publications that explore religious doubt.

Again the majority, 56 per cent, felt that such materials should be completely disallowed.

The rest of the respondents said these materials should not be completely banned. However, the majority of this group (55 per cent) said that these films or publications should not be freely circulated.

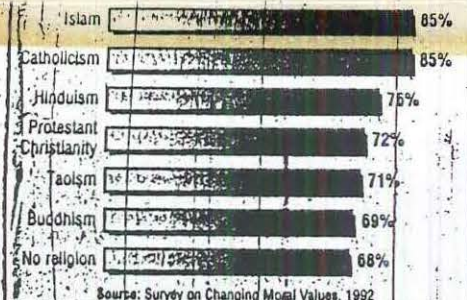
Most of the respondents did not even relent on artistic works that may offend certain religious groups in Singapore. Eight out of 10 felt that there should be complete, or some, censorship of such works.

Only 8 per cent of the respondents felt that there should be no censorship in order to allow artistic expression. The younger and highly educated Singaporeans are the ones most likely to hold this view.

56 per cent felt that films and publications that explore religious doubt should be completely disallowed.

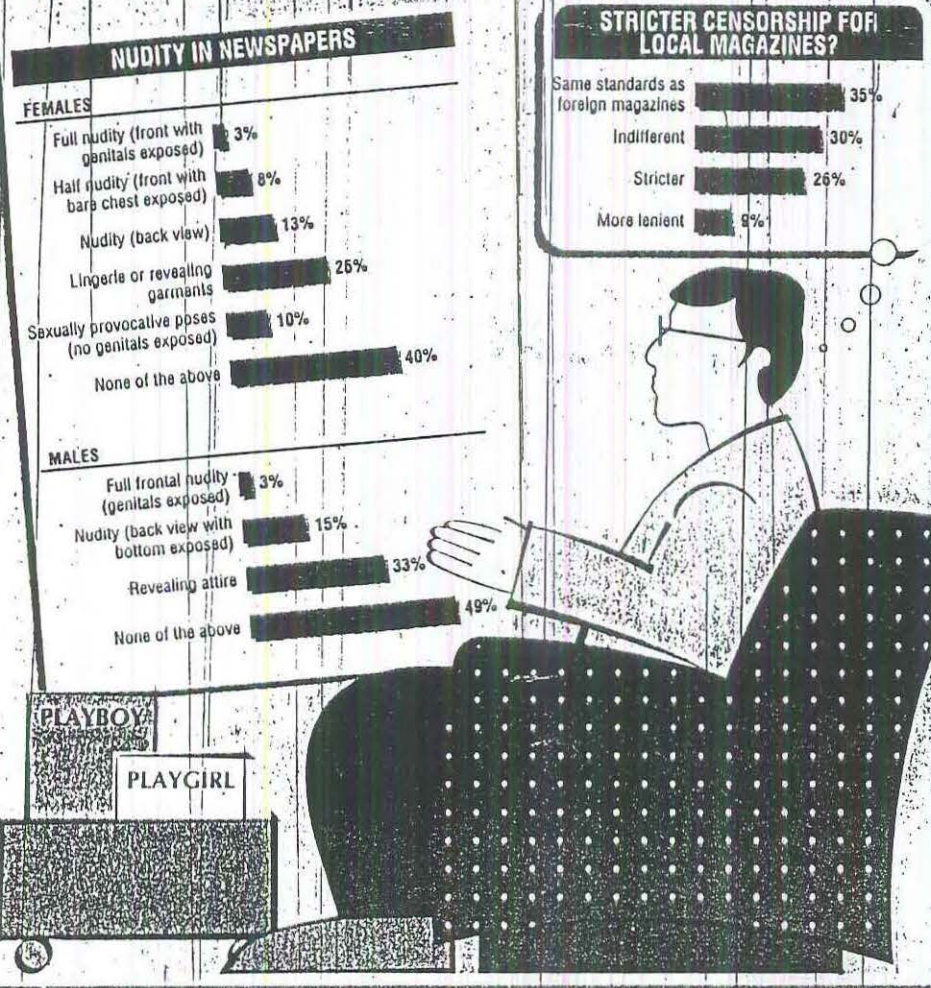
Ban films and books that offend religions

The percentage from the various religious groups

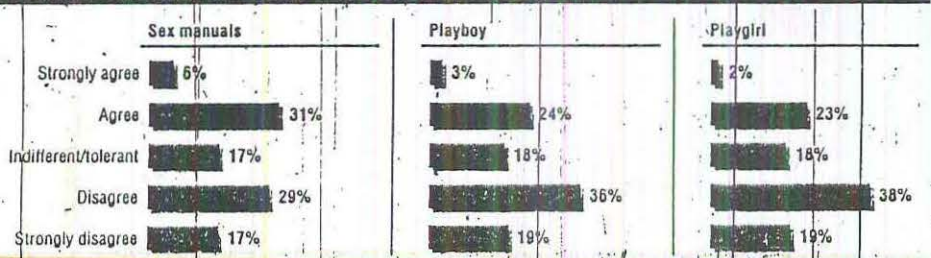


WHAT'S IN AND WHAT'S NOT

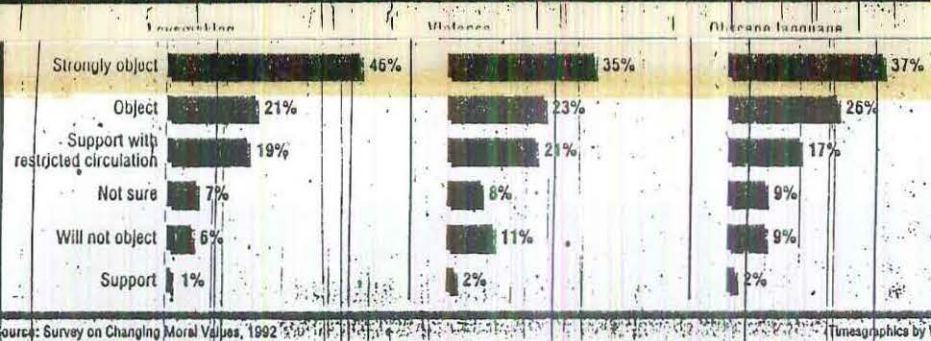
Singaporeans' views on what should be allowed or banned in newspapers, magazines, comics and foreign publications



SHOULD PLAYBOY, PLAYGIRL AND SEX MANUALS BE SOLD?



COMICS: WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE?



newspapers or in comics, please

SINGAPOREANS do not want a local version of The Sun, the British tabloid that gained notoriety for its Page 3 photograph of nude women.

The Censorship Review Committee survey found that most Singaporeans — seven out of 10 — do not want pictures of naked men or women in their dailies.

The main reason for their disapproval was that children have easy access to newspapers.

However, those interviewed were not as disapproving of pictures of men and women partially covered up.

During the survey, the respondents were shown exhibits of male and female subjects in various degrees of nudity.

They were then asked what level of nudity they would allow in each type of printed material.

Although most of them were not in favour of any form of nudity, a large percentage of the respondents felt it was all right for newspapers to carry pictures of men or women in revealing clothes.

About half of the respondents (51 per cent) also disapproved of nude sketches or paintings in local newspapers but there was also a sizeable proportion (30 per cent) who approved.

Again, because children are avid readers of comics, most of the survey respondents also objected to nudes

in such publications. More than half the respondents said "no" to both male and female nudes in comics.

An overwhelming majority (71 per cent) said it was not acceptable even if the private parts of nudes were blotted out in magazines and comics.

The majority of respondents also disapproved of nude posters and calendars even if they were allowed only for personal use.

Not surprisingly, of those who were in favour of such materials, a high proportion were males in the 13 to 31 years old.

However, most of the respondents felt that partially-covered nude pictures in calendars, posters and record album covers should be allowed.

For magazines, Singaporeans had double standards for local and foreign magazines.

About the same number of Singaporeans objected to nudes in local magazines as in the newspapers. But a higher proportion of them were willing to accept pictures of nude bodies in foreign magazines.

When asked if they approved of pictures of naked women in magazines, 4 per cent of the respondents said they would accept them in local magazines but 13 per cent approved of them for foreign magazines.

Half say 'no' to homosexual and lesbian materials

SINGAPOREANS strongly disapprove of homosexuality and lesbianism as a way of life, but they may be more tolerant of books or songs which accept or encourage such behaviour.

The Censorship Review Committee survey found that although 88 per cent of the respondents disapproved of homosexuality and lesbianism as a way of life, only 50 per cent disapproved of printed and audio materials that accept or encourage such behaviour.

However, most of the others who approved of them said not all materials should be allowed or they should be restricted to adults only.

In terms of race, a higher proportion of Malays (66 per cent) were more in favour of the ban of such materials as compared to the other races because of their religion and upbringing.

The older respondents, especially those aged 41 and above, were more disapproving.

Those who approved of such printed and audio materials were asked if they would allow films with themes or sub-plots on homosexual and lesbian behaviour.

Among them, 34 per cent said the Government should not allow this type of film. About the same proportion said these films should be allowed only for adults while 13 per cent said they should be open to everyone.

However, respondents who were more liberal about these films said cinemas should not allow children and teenagers to view them.

Books and magazines with pictures depicting aspects of homosexual or lesbian behaviour were less favourably received.

Only 17 per cent of the respondents approved of such materials.

Most respondents were worried about the visual impact of these pictures on young people who may have easy access to them.

TALKINGPOINT

The Straits Times spoke to some people for their reactions to the survey

■ **Mr S. K. Khoo, 64, retired:** "We are Asians, not Westerners. What is good for them may not be good for us."

■ **Mr Tan Chong Ewe, 63, retired, speaking in Mandarin:**

"It doesn't matter whether we are Chinese, Malay or Indian, we are all Easterners. So, we have traditional cultural values which bind us."

■ **Miss Chai Yeng Yeng, 19, factory operator, speaking in Mandarin:** "Singaporeans are conservative because they are influenced by their religious beliefs."

■ **The older folk, who are more mature and stable and who are against liberal attitudes on issues like cohabitation, also puts on their values to the younger ones.**

■ **Madam Hamidah Amid, 54, telephoneist and mother of two:** "Nowadays, youngsters are freely smoking in the MRT trains in front of other people."

■ **"I know a lot of mothers who say they are having problems with their children who hang out at Marina and East Coast and are more Westernised."**

■ **Mrs Anita Ali, 40, private kindergarten teacher and mother of an 18-year-old son:**

"My niece is studying in Australia and she always remind her that we are Asian and should therefore conserve our Asian values."

■ **Even though Singaporeans are exposed to Western culture, they are still Asian ultimately. It's our centuries-old values which have been handed down from generation to generation.**

■ **Mr Pongy Chan, 35, airport security guard:**

"The majority of Singaporeans still value the old ways. We try to be Westernised in areas like fashion but this does not extend to our values and morality not in the way we live."



Mr S. K. Khoo



Madam Linda Yong



Madam Hamidah



Mrs Arli Ramchand



Mrs Pongy Chan



Mr Oei Kwan Wee

■ **Madam Linda Yong, 36, manager of a service company:** "It's good to be conservative because Aids and abortion will not exist if we all shared the same line of thinking."

■ **Mr Tan Yin Choong, 36, electrical serviceman:** "I fear that the Government may be influenced by the results of this survey and reverse its open-door policies."

■ **"I certainly hope that they will open up further. As more and more people are better educated, they should have more leeway to choose what they want to see and do. As long as you don't hurt or harm anybody, it should be okay."**

■ **Mrs Arli Ramchand, 41, a housewife with a 14-year-old son:** "I think Indian women may appear to be very forward, like going to discos, but when we really get down to basics, we find that they are conservative at heart. The values have been inbred in them through the generations."

■ **Mrs Juliana Mohan, 35, teacher:** "As a parent and an educator, I'm quite concerned about the shows that are appearing on the big screen and on TV. I'm afraid of the impact of these on the young."

■ **"I'm glad to see that such a high percentage of people disapprove of issues like pre-marital sex."**

■ **Miss Mary Yee, 23, dog groomer:** "Those people who complain that the survey does not reflect the true picture are probably the more vocal ones in society. They may also be more radical and hold more liberal views themselves."

■ **Mr Oei Kwan Wee, 17, private school student:**

"Teenagers like me are more open-minded because of the education we receive and the Western movies we watch."

■ **"People may say what those in authority think is correct, but that may not be what they actually do."**

Interviews by Julia Goh

The Straits Times, 9 July 1991, pg. 22

Too many 'R' movies, film-goers complain

By Grace Fernando

ISN'T there anything else to watch these days other than soft-porn "R"-rated movies?

This was the lament of movie-goers yesterday, as they pointed out that more than two-thirds of Singapore cinemas are now screening "restricted" or "R"-rated movies.

Of the 55 cinemas, 46 are screening one of four "R"-rated movies.

Movie-goers complained that this was limiting their choice of entertainment.

But film distributors say they intend to bring in even more "R"-rated movies because of their popularity.

Under the new four-tier film classification system, only those aged 18 and above will be admitted to "R"-rated movies.

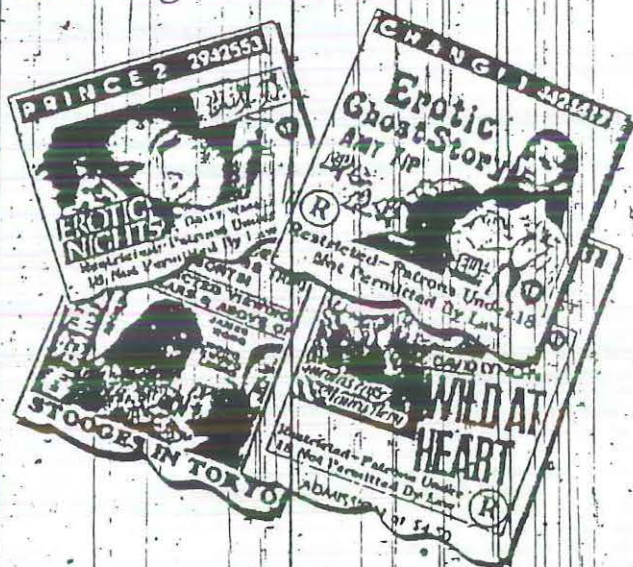
Films classified in this category may feature scenes of nudity, sexual foreplay or violence.

However, scenes containing sexual intercourse, rape and themes promoting drug-taking or those which may cause racial and religious disharmony will still be cut.

While patrons do welcome the new classification system, saying that theoretically it should ensure wider access to films which otherwise might not be shown here, some also think that the sheer number of cinemas showing the movies is severely limiting their choice of movie entertainment.

The four movies currently

Out of 55 cinemas, 46 are showing 'restricted' films



"R"-rated films are popular, say film distributors, and they intend to bring in even more.

playing are Wild At Heart, Erotic Nights, Erotic Ghost Story and Stoooges in Tokyo.

Only three cinemas are screening Wild At Heart, while the soft-porn "sexploitation" movies, Erotic Nights and Erotic Ghost Story, are running at 14 and 16 cinemas respectively.

Another "R"-rated movie from Hongkong, Stoooges in Tokyo, is playing at 13 cinemas.

Michelle Tan, 19, an undergraduate, thinks this is not very fair to the under 18s,

who are prohibited by law from watching the movies.

"These teenagers haven't really got anything else to see, and I've got nothing to watch myself if I don't want to see an "R"-rated movie."

"Besides, how many times can you watch an "R"-rated film?" she asked.

Agreeing, Miss Felicia Lim, 17, a student, said: "It does limit my choices since I can't watch the "R"-rated movies."

"Even the ads for the other movies began getting smaller and smaller when the "R"-rat-

ed movies started, and you can't really spot them at all."

Mr Samly Lim, 55, a security officer, also agrees.

"There is really nothing good to watch now if you're under 18," he said.

But distributors insisted that movie buffs are not being limited in their film choices.

Said a spokesman for Cathay Organisation, which is showing Stoooges in Tokyo in seven of its 13 cinemas: "In a given week, in our circuit alone, audiences have a choice of five different shows."

Mr C. Y. Chen of Shaw's commented that while the majority of its 19 cinemas are showing Erotic Nights, Erotic Ghost Story and Wild At Heart, the organisation is also showing three non-"R"-rated movies.

"Capitol and Prince, our two biggest cinemas, are showing Robin Hood and Flight of the Intruder," he said.

The cinema operators and distributors said that they believe good response from Singaporeans to "R"-rated movies was partly due to their curiosity about what the films are really like.

This interest is prompting the companies to make plans to bring in more "R"-rated films.

This trend is cause for concern for Mrs Lynette Balota, 35, a mother of two.

She said: "If it's about nothing but sex, then it does nothing for anyone. If it doesn't have any artistic value."

The Straits Times, March 1991, Page 28

Call to make the arts part of nation's economic, social fabric

Of shaver ribs and design

MAKE the arts part of Singapore's economic and social development so that it will be treated as an investment rather than consumption, Brigadier-General (Res) George Yeo said yesterday.

The Acting Minister for Information and the Arts also told MPs that while the Government would provide the infrastructure for the arts here, there should be a partnership between Government and the private sector to finance cultural programmes.

Outlining the broad approach for his new ministry, set up last November, BG Yeo said: "This is the overall approach we should take towards the arts — combine it with our economy, into our social life, so that it strengthens us in the long term and so that expenditure on the arts is no longer seen as consumption but as investment."

He reiterated that in promoting the arts, the Government would "facilitate, nudge, apply a light touch, but never, never a heavy hand".

But he assured MPs that the Government would move decisively to provide the necessary infrastructure for the arts, citing as examples the building of a multi-million-dollar performing arts centre in Marina Bay and the proposed museum precinct at Fort Canning which will increase the floor space for museums by ten-fold over the next 10 to 15 years.

But while it could give support for performances through tax incentives and endowments, there should also be an equal partnership with individuals and corporations.

On how best to finance the arts, he said that Mita would consider all suggestions, including a proposal by Mr

"There was an interesting example about the design of an electric shaver. On the side were ribs. And someone thought that the ribs were there purely for aesthetic reasons. Well, they were not, because they help in the grip. Also, they found out that by having those ribs, you were also able to use a lower-quality plastic, which saved the manufacturer a lot of money. So because the manufacturers and the marketers thought together, they were able to combine fit, form and function into the product and made it better. So whether you are Singapore Airlines or a Japanese restaurant, or in any of the service industry, it is very important that all the way down from the CEO, creative elements, design, art are built into the system."

— BG Yeo quoting an extract from an article in *The Economist* to illustrate the importance of design.

Heng Chiang Meng (Cheng San GRQ), for a 5 per cent arts cess or an endowment fund to support the National Arts Council, which will be set up in the middle of the year.

But he added: "If we rely only on government financing it would destroy the market, it would destroy the artistic development because the Government would adopt a dirigiste top-down approach and there will be tremendous frustration on the ground."

He rejected a suggestion by Mr Heng that a speech made by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong last November when he reopened the National Museum showed that the Government treated the arts as a luxury which could only be afforded if the economy was booming.

What the Prime Minister meant to point out was that it was possible to spend too

much money on the arts and on things which were beyond the ken and the understanding of the people, said BG Yeo.

He added that the basic aim of the arts should be to strengthen society, promote social cohesion and uplift the people's morale.

He agreed with Mr Heng that in a competitive world, the arts becomes part of the economic and social fabric of a society. Firms have to learn to "fit form with function", he said, incorporating elements of design and creativity.

Recounting how Fuji Sankei, chairman Haruo Shikama had told him that like Mita, his firm aimed to combine information with culture, BG Yeo said: "The more the two get entwined together, the more competitive you become. So it is not hardware, it is not software. In the end, it is heartware."

The Straits Times, July 1992, pg. 22

Community has last word on films, not government censors

Rama Meyappan wrongly seen as Czar of Censorship, says Film Appeals head

Reports by Felix Soh

UNKNOWN to many people, the final decision on whether a film ought to be screened is not made by the Government but by members of Singapore's community.

The nine members of the Committee of Appeal are a cross-section of the community, from grassroots leaders to educationists to lawyers.

They are, in the words of their chairman, a final "court" of appeal, like the High Court.

Giving The Straits Times a rare glimpse into the workings of the low-profile committee, Mr Huan Owyang, said: "The panel, which can make the difference in the final product to be shown, comprises a cross-section of society."

"There have been quite a number of occasions when the panel differed from the decision of the Board of Film Censors," added Mr Owyang.

He has been the chairman of the committee since 1985. He also chairs the Housing and Development Board.

"In this sense, censorship is not 100 per cent controlled by the Government."

Panel members represent the main ethnic communities in Singapore. They decide on appeals from film distributors whose movies may have been cut or banned by the Board of Film Censors (BFC).

Each is appointed by the Minister of Information and

MY CHAIRMAN, THE FILM BUFF

ASK him to name the winners of the Oscars from 1928 onwards and the chances are that Mr Huan Owyang will have the answers.

The committee's vice-chairman, Ms Pang Cheng Lian, said that he is so knowledgeable about movies and the film industry that his expertise has helped to guide the panel's discussions.

She said: "He is a very good chairman because, for one, he is personally interested in films." He has chaired the Committee of Appeal since 1985.

"He gives valuable background about the films being reviewed and provides insights which help to guide the committee's discussions," she said.

Also, said Ms Pang, the chairman is an objective person who always takes the social environment into consideration.

She commented: "Mr Owyang will take the big picture and ask: Is the social environment willing to accept this film?"



Mr Huan Owyang

the Arts for a year. The panel is empowered to approve, classify or recommend cuts to any objectionable parts of a film.

In the present committee, appointed on July 1, are the vice-chairman, Ms Pang Cheng Lian (a vice-president of the United Overseas Bank Group); Mr Toh Weng Cheong (lawyer and community leader);

Mr V.C. Krishnan (an administrator with SBC); Mr Goh Soo Tian (lecturer); Mr Ibrahim Othman (MP for Thomson GRC); Mr Philip Jeyaretnam (lawyer and writer); Mr Koh Buck Song (journalist and poet) and Dr Seet

Kham Keong (university lecturer).

Mr Owyang, himself a film buff, commented that because the BFC was a government department, people had the impression that the Government decides on censorship.

He said that the BFC's head, Mr Rama Meyappan, is often wrongly perceived as the "Czar of Censorship."

"This is not the case. The Appeals Committee can overrule him," he pointed out. "And our decision is final."

He said: "The censors have rules which they sometimes follow to a T. That's their job."

"But the committee looks at the picture as a whole. We

look at the macro level rather than the micro, so we tend to be more flexible."

Even before a film is brought before the Appeal Committee, there is a consultative 36-member Films Advisory Panel which helps the board decide if a film should be passed clean or otherwise. Its members include housewives and teachers.

Explaining the principle guiding the Committee of Appeal, Mr Owyang said: "Basically, we adopt a moderate approach."

"We avoid the extreme — being neither extremely conservative nor extremely liberal."

But any film with an anti-religious theme is immediately banned.

It is in grey areas that the committee can be useful. For instance, "it may consider passing some nude scenes that are not pornographic in content."

"But in movies like soft-porn films from Hongkong in which nude scenes are for profiteering and are vulgar and have no artistic value, we will ban," he said.

"The intention of the producer would have to be watched, he pointed out."

How does the panel carry out its work?

"After viewing the films, each of the members will individually express his or her views," said Mr Owyang.

"The chairman will then weigh the views. The majority view prevails. Based on this, a decision will be made."

"The views of members are recorded and the final decision has to be justified."

And these views are as balanced as the committee's approach is moderate.

Said the panel's vice-chairman, Ms Pang Cheng Lian: "Some effort has been made to give some balance to the composition of the committee."

"The members represent different facets of society, with not only conservative and liberal elements but also young and old."

Frenetic race to build more cinemas

SPECIAL REPORT

By Felix Soh

BY THE end of next year, movie-crazy Singaporeans will have another 40 movie halls to catch the latest blockbusters as film operators move into high gear to build more cinemas.

The pace is frenetic. At the moment, all the country's four major film operators are building new cinemas or upgrading old ones, or embarking on both simultaneously. This means that Singapore, already the world's most avid film-going nation, will have a total of 111 cinema halls with 64,000 seats.

And there are plans to build even more cinemas, particularly in the neighbourhoods where the majority of Singaporeans live and where the market has the richest potential.

Variety, the authoritative US entertainment industry newspaper, pointed out in a recent focus on the Singapore cinema business that the densely-populated housing estates are "underscreened".

Besides volume, the other critical factor is the cheaper land in the outskirts.

Singapore has the world's highest yearly per capita cinema admissions — 7.8 films per person compared to 3.8 in the United States, 1.9 in Thailand, 1.6 in Malaysia and 1 in Indonesia.

Cinema attendances, which hit a record 22 million last year, continue to be robust this year. They averaged 1.6 million for the first six months.

Commented Mr Paul Chung, sales manager of Pearl and Dean Pte Ltd, one of the two cinema advertising agencies here: "The cinema industry is in a very healthy situation, especially when there are currently lots of good and entertaining films."

Now the trend

The cinema is the trend. All the new cinemas being built are multi-hall complexes while existing ones are being remodelled as multiplexes.

This cinema-building boom is expected to change the dynamics of the business here.

It sees not only new players like Golden Village breaking the stranglehold on the local film scene by the stalwarts — Shaw and Cathay — but also a surge in cinema admissions.

Shaw, the biggest film operator here, will be completing three cinemas with 11 halls by mid-1993.

These include Singapore's third art cinema and Shaw's second, Lido Classics, to tap the growing coterie of film aficionados.

Cathay's Tampines cineplex of four halls, a stone's throw from the MRT station, is expected to be ready by the next Lunar New Year.

For Eng Wah Organisation,

conversation is the name of the game.

It is converting three single-hall neighbourhood cinemas — Empress (Clementi), Toa Payoh and Jubilee (Ang Mo Kio) — into cineplexes.

The new kid on the block, Golden Village — which opened Singapore's biggest cineplex of 10 halls, Yishun 10, in late May — is the most aggressive of the film operators.

By early 1994, it will have an additional 20 halls with 5,300 seats, including one located literally atop the Tiong Bahru MRT station.

Golden Village is also actively exploring new sites. Its major consideration — and this seems to be the case with the other film operators — is that any new cinema must be located close to a public transport station.

Cinema-goers stand to gain

What will be the impact of the proliferation of new generation cinemas?

For one, Singaporeans will have a wider choice of both cinemas and films. This will force film operators to provide better service — or lose customers to the rival cinema.

Clearly, the consumer will stand to benefit.

Said film critic, Mr Philip Cheah, the programme director for the Singapore Film Festival: "Competing exhibitors will be vying for customers and will have no choice but to upgrade their services."

"As they enter a more competitive environment, they will, for example, have to acquire quality sound systems like the THX system."

The impact on programming is obvious — there will be greater variety, better quality films.

Said Mr Cheah: "In this instance, the distributor's

can't run a cinema without a computerised ticketing system like the one we have at Yishun 10."

One advantage of this system is the ability to handle advance booking.

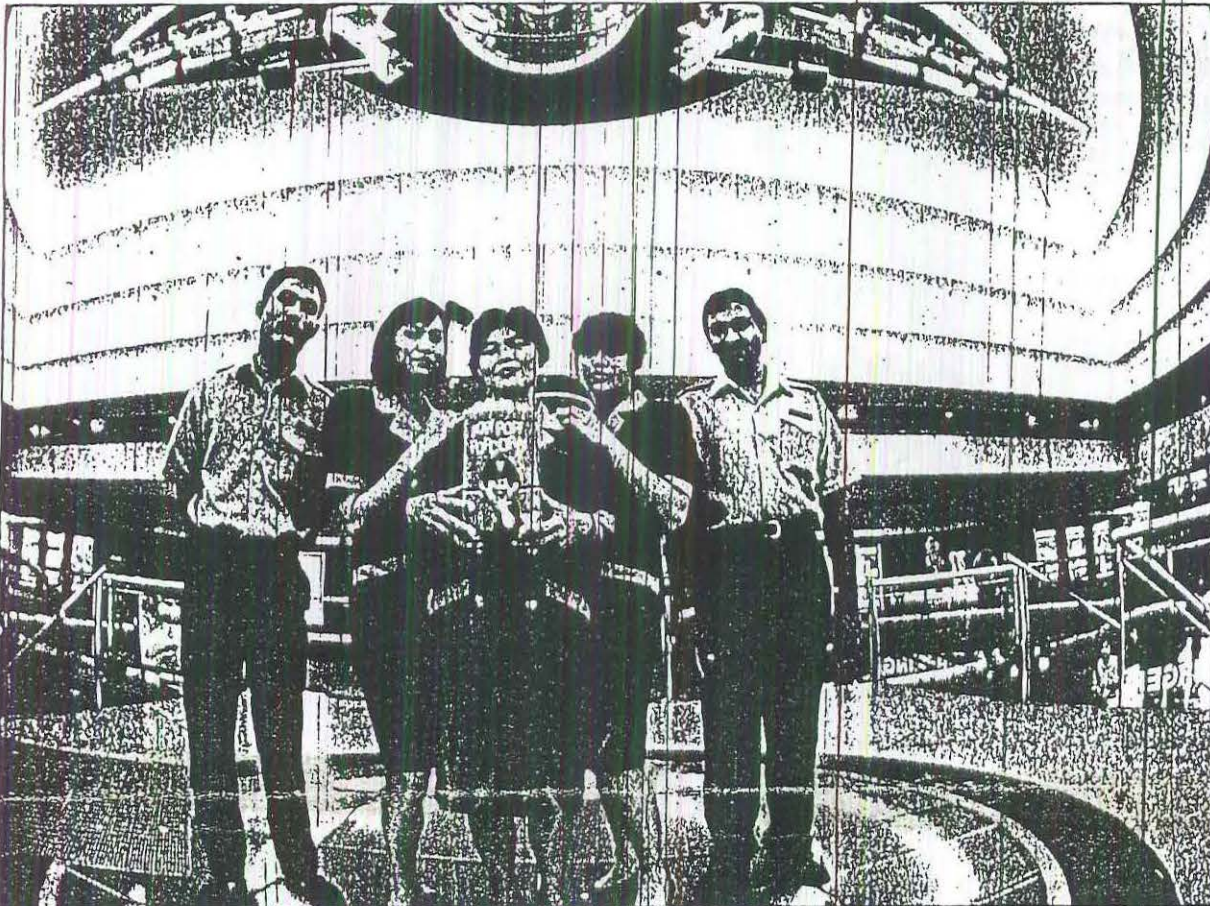
Except for Yishun 10, the other film operators use an antiquated manual system that has not changed for decades.

Soon, in a "first" by a cinema here, Yishun 10 will allow patrons to book seats for the mega-production, Batman Returns, three weeks in advance.

Another major impact of the increased number of cinemas will be a change in the travelling pattern of Singaporeans.

Rather than go all the way to Orchard Road or the city, they will travel shorter distances to the town centres for a movie.

This will have negative ripple effects on other businesses in the city, like shopping centres and fast-food outlets. But



Service is the word... cinema operators will have to pay closer attention to providing service in the face of increasing competition. The Yishun 10 cineplex is setting the trend. Here, the ushers, operators and popcorn girl combine their services with a pleasant ambience to draw the neighbourhood film-goer.

Yishun 10 is setting the trend. We are forcing others like Shaw and Cathay to change, to improve their technology."

Ticketing is one area where the other film operators are lagging.

Recently, there were 33 minutes of advertising during the screening of the blockbuster Lethal Weapon 3 at Capitol Theatre.

"This is not only annoying to patrons, but advertisers are not getting value for money," said Mr John Pearson, the general manager of Pearl and Dean.

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les. They account for 60 to 65 per cent of the yearly box-office receipts of around \$100 million.

The monster hit, Once Upon a Time in China 2, starring Jet Li, has raked in over \$2 million.

Said Miss Cynthia Goh of Eng Wah Organisation: "Once Upon a Time in China 2 helped push up attendances."

She added: "Chinese movies, particularly those with three stars — Jet Li, Stephen Chow and Jackie Chan — will always do well. These three stars are guaranteed box office hits."

"Even the non-Chinese root for Jackie Chan, whose Police Story 3 is poised to beat all box office records in Malaysia. This film will start its run here soon."

Real test to come

But the real test for film operators will come in the next two months, during which the admission figures will be tracked closely.

In July and August last year, admissions rocketed by 500,000 because of the proliferation of Restricted movies. The figure was 2.4 million in August alone.

But from September, when the film classification system was modified so that Restricted (Artistic) movies replaced R-rated ones, they dropped back to the pre-July figure.

So, an examination of the cinema attendances for these months will throw some light on the level of sophistication of Singaporean audiences.

Will they continue to flock to the cinemas without the draw of salacious R-rated movies?

They will do so, say some observers of the film industry. If film operators deliver the goods in terms of offering good service and providing entertaining, quality films.

Noted film critic Philip Cheah: "What we want is a situation where cinema-going is fun and cultural."

AKAN DATANG...

More cinemas sprouting up in Singapore

THE CINEPLEX

COMING ATTRACTIONS

CONVERSION TO CINEPLEX IN AUGUST 1992		
Eng Wah	• Empress: 3 halls	900 seats
COMPLETION BY LUNAR NEW YEAR 1993		
Cathay	• Tampines: 4 halls	2,200 seats
COMPLETION BY MIDDLE 1993		
Shaw	• Lido 1-4	2,219 seats
	• Lido Classics	1,112 seats
	• Jurong: 4 halls	1,400 seats
	• Oriental: 2 halls	Not determined
CONVERSION TO CINEPLEX IN 1993		
Eng Wah	• Toa Payoh: 3 halls	900, 1,200 seats

CONVERSION TO CINEPLEX IN MIDDLE 1993		
Eng Wah	• Jubilee: 3 halls	900 seats
COMPLETION BY LATE 1993		
Golden Village	• Parkway Parade: 8 halls	2,200 seats
	• Bishan: 6 halls	1,500 seats
COMPLETION BY EARLY 1994		
Golden Village	• Tiong Bahru: 6 halls	1,600 seats
Now	• 65 halls	50,227 seats
Coming up	• 48 halls	13,721 seats
GRAND TOTAL	111 halls	83,948 seats

Source: Cathay, Shaw, Eng Wah and Golden Village

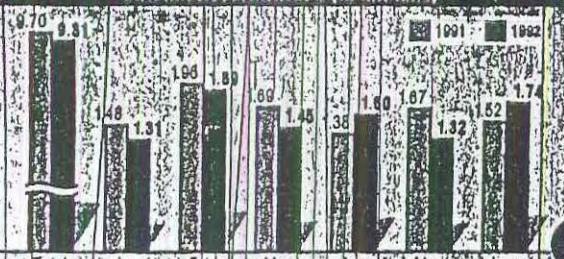


PROFILE OF CINEMA-GOERS

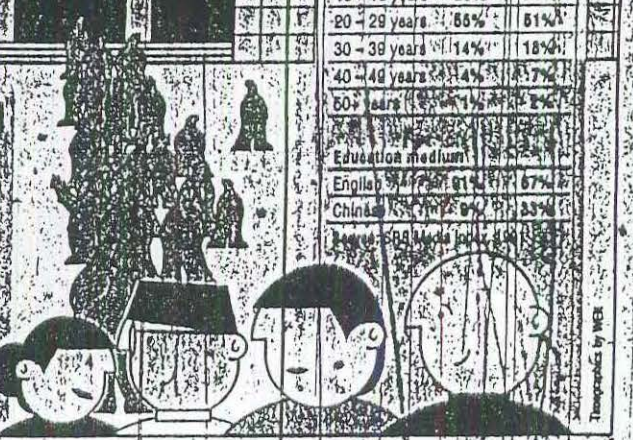
	English movies	Chinese movies
TOTAL ('000)	200	216
Sex		
Male	59%	63%
Female	41%	37%
Race		
Chinese	77%	100%
Malay	11%	
Indian	7%	
Others	8%	
Age		
16-19 years	26%	22%
20-29 years	66%	61%
30-39 years	14%	18%
40-49 years	4%	17%
50+ years	1%	2%
Education medium		
English	61%	67%
Chinese	39%	33%

Source: SRS Media Index, 1991

CINEMA ATTENDANCES (in millions)



Source: Department of Statistics



The Straits Times, 22 April 1993, pg. 36

Tax incentives to boost S'pore's film-making industry

Movie-making 'vital for Republic's development into a media hub'

SINGAPORE is poised to become a total business support centre for the film industry with the Government's announcement yesterday that venture capital funds used for film and media projects here will be considered for wide-ranging tax incentives.

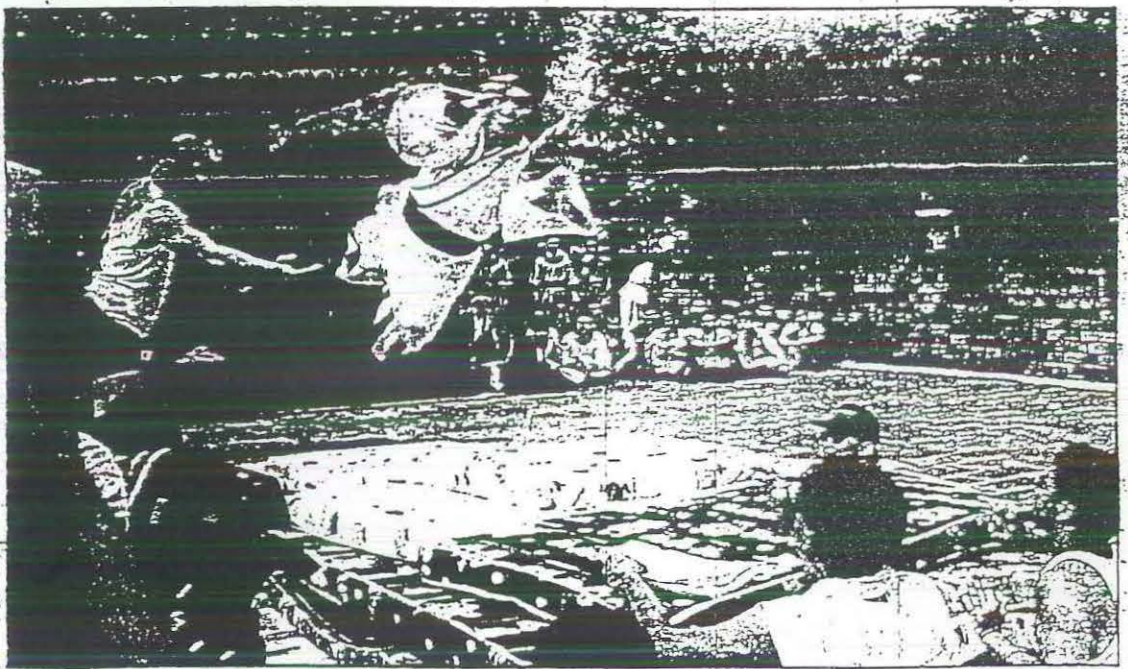
The latest concession, announced by the Economic Development Board, follows EDB's offer of pioneer incentives and training grant assistance for film production projects here.

Launching the seminar on Risk Management and Finance in the Film Industry, EDB chairman Philip Yeo said that the movie-making business was an important part of Singapore's development into a media and communications hub.

Apart from becoming a marketing, distribution and programming centre for the Asian region, the Republic could also enjoy spin-offs in other areas. These include production logistics, equipment rental, high-end computer animation and special effects studio capabilities, he said.

The industry would also provide a further boost to Singapore's financial, legal and other professional services sector.

Elaborating on the tax incentives, he said that the EDB was prepared to consider tax exemptions, on a case-by-case basis, for capital gains and overseas dividends



Camera! Tape reeling! Action! Sam Hui during the shooting of a scene from "All's Well, Ends Well II" at Tang Dynasty City.

derived from venture capital fund operations within the film-making sector.

Venture capital fund management activities will also be able to enjoy the waiver.

Besides the tax incentives, he said that Singapore was actively promoting the train-

ing and development of creative and specialised technical skills.

He said: "We have an open policy to attract international quality projects, the best talents and the latest technologies. Good progress has been made so far. We already have

top-grade video production and post-production facilities, and a film processing and print laboratory."

He highlighted too that Ngee Ann Polytechnic would be introducing technical skills training in film, sound and video technology from July.

And as a testimony to the good progress made, Mr Yeo said that Mandarin Films of Hongkong had one of its Singapore-made films, "All's Well, Ends Well II", recording box office successes in Hongkong, Taipei and Singapore recently.

CINEMAS from Los Angeles to Tokyo may some day show films produced entirely in Singapore — if plans to promote the local movie production industry work out. So far, two international movie moguls have announced plans to invest in million-dollar movie production studios here.

The Straits Times Economics Desk puts the spotlight on the movie production industry in the following articles. **SHAUN SEOW** examines the bright and dark spots while **KOH-BEE ANN** uncovers the bulls and bears among Singapore production companies.

Tinseltown in Singapore

Local film industry receives boost from foreign movie makers

SINGAPORE, Hollywood of the East? To many people, the idea sounds as improbable as some of the fanciful movie scripts that Hollywood blockbusters are made of.

Such a reaction is not totally unexpected. It is true that Singapore has had some successes with Chinese television drama serials, but otherwise, a local movie production industry is practically non-existent.

Yet there are those who talk of the Singapore movie production industry's immense growth potential.

This optimism can be traced to two recent and independent events. First, there was the disclosure by Hongkong tycoon Deacon Chiu in February of his plans to produce an average of three films a year in Singapore. This will be in conjunction with Mr Chiu's \$50 million Tang Dynasty Village project in Jurong.

The second came two weeks later, when Italy's Cecchi Gori Group announced plans to invest in a \$120 million movie studio in Tuas. Cecchi Gori plans to produce about 10 English language movies a year, starting with one using the Raffles Hotel as a backdrop.

Its distributor is none other than entertainment colossus Warner Brothers, which is also said to be keen on establishing a foothold here in the near future.

These multi-million dollar projects have, however, failed to crack the thick crust of scepticism among many people, including local video producers.

Their scepticism is not totally baseless, considering that Singapore does not have a large pool of skilled technical manpower and readily-available supporting facilities.

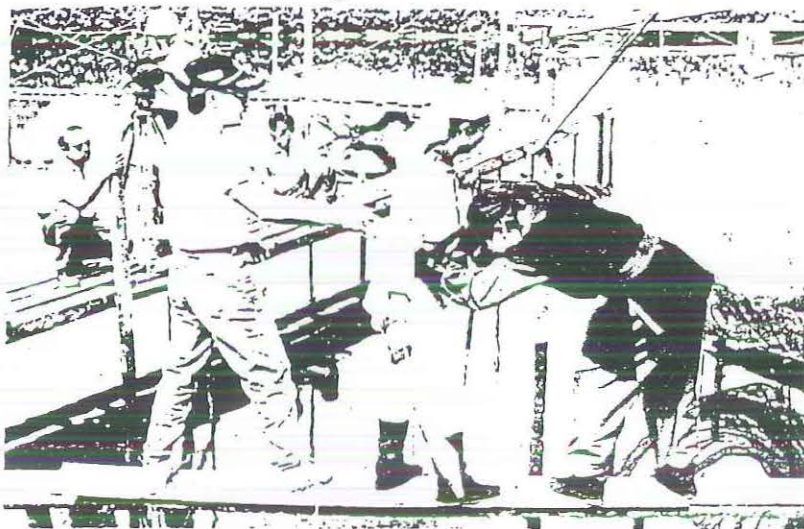
Passion Flower — starring Bruce Boxleitner and Barbara Hershey — was perhaps the closest Singapore came in recent years to being involved in a feature film for international distribution. But even then, the American producer brought in most of the film crew and equipment from overseas.

The question on many minds is: Why have these bigwigs chosen Singapore over the other more established movie production centres in the region such as Australia, Hongkong and Taiwan?

According to the Cecchi Gori Group and Mr Chiu, the factors in Singapore's favour include political stability, enthusiastic workforce, some movie production facilities and good location.

Further, they could use the Republic as a springboard to penetrate a regional market of more than 300 million people.

Perhaps Singapore's most unique attraction is the help given by the Economic Development Board through its incentives in the movie



SBC in action... location shooting may soon be part and parcel of Singapore life.

production industry.

The Government's efforts to promote the industry originated from a proposal by the Economic Committee in the wake of the 1985 recession. A high-level pan-ministry committee was subsequently formed to develop the industry.

But the EDB is not throwing its doors wide open to every film producer who comes a-knocking. Instead, it seeks only the "quality investments" which are in line with Singapore's policy of encouraging high value-added economic activities.

EDB's reasons for moving in this direction are obvious. Firstly, substantial economic spin-offs can be expected in the form of jobs for local script writers, performing artists, animators, set and costume designers and cameramen.

Secondly, the industry could boost the local tourism industry, the way *Grocodile Dundee* helped highlight the Australian outback.

Thirdly, supporting industries could be developed, such as film processing, optical and special effects generation, set construction, release printing and dubbing facilities.

However, the EDB's efforts may be hampered by some obstacles, including the Government's tough stand on film censorship.

All movie scripts are vetted to make sure that they do not discredit Singapore. The authorities can be

expected to be extra careful in this regard, especially with memories of *Saint Jack* still fresh in their minds. The film, based on Paul Theroux's novel, is about an American pimp in Singapore.

Director Peter Bogdanovich submitted a phoney synopsis of the script to the then Culture Ministry in order to shoot the film here in the late 1970s. The Government later learnt that the two-hour movie was spiced with steamy sex scenes and flagrant "misinterpretation" of Singapore life.

Gloated over fooling authorities

To make matters worse, Mr Bogdanovich, in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, gloated about how he "fooled" the Singapore authorities. The film was subsequently banned in 1980.

Other possible obstacles include inadequate technical manpower. Many trained cameramen from the Malay film industry of the 1960s have opted out of their jobs. Most of those still active are employed by STC.

"Extra costs" also add up. Movie "extras" here are said to charge as much as \$250 to \$300 a day, compared to \$75 in Hong Kong.

Another foreign film producer claimed it was almost "next to impossible" to shoot aerial scenes here.

A further stumbling block is the shortage of facilities such as film developing and processing laboratories.

Singapore also faces competition from established movie production centres such as Hongkong and Australia. However, some dark clouds loom on the horizons of their industries: Australia's film industry seems to be suffering from excess capacity, while Hongkong has to contend with its "brain drain" in anticipation of 1997.

A boost to the Singapore industry can be expected over the next few years as Hongkong movie talents leave the colony and head this way.

Already Mr Eric Tsang, one of Hongkong's favourite comedians, is said to be keen on investing in the Singapore film industry. Mr Tsang owns a production company called *Children's Town*, which has made two movies.

"To me, Singapore is an ideal place to make films. Because I can only make Chinese films, I can't do it in Australia or Canada," he said in Singapore last month.

But anyone hoping to see Singapore build up a Hollywood over night will be disappointed. Indications are that it may take 10 years before a homegrown movie production industry can take off.

If and when this happens, the story of how it came about could well be one of the most exciting scripts ever to be written about Singapore.